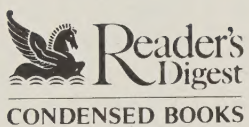
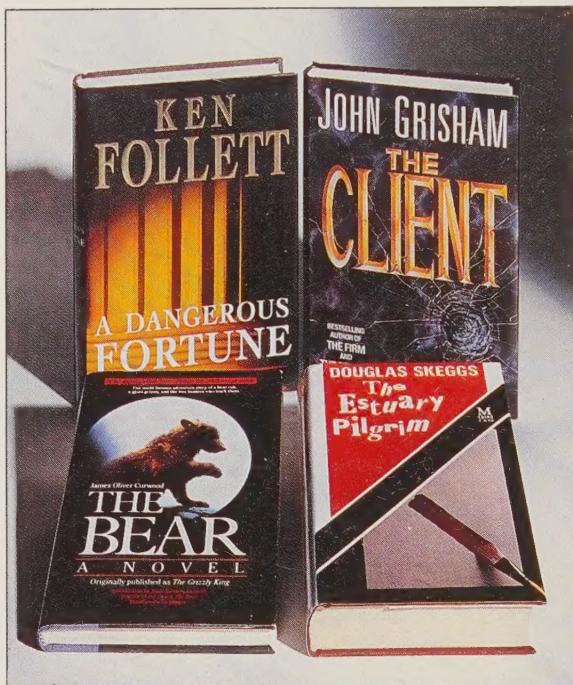


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## A DANGEROUS FORTUNE

**Ken Follett**

PUBLISHED BY MACMILLAN LONDON

## THE CLIENT

**John Grisham**

PUBLISHED BY CENTURY

## THE ESTUARY PILGRIM

**Douglas Skeggs**

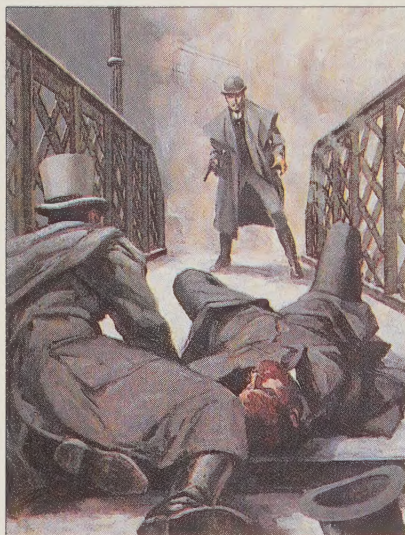
PUBLISHED BY MACMILLAN LONDON

## THE BEAR

**James Oliver Curwood**

PUBLISHED BY NEWMARKET PRESS, NEW YORK

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### A DANGEROUS FORTUNE

**Ken Follett**

In 1866, tragedy strikes at an exclusive public school. A pupil drowns in a mysterious accident involving several boys. Among them are young Hugh Pilaster; his cousin Edward, the weak, dissolute heir to the Pilaster banking fortune; and Micky Miranda, the darkly handsome son of a brutal South American landowner. The drowning and its aftermath initiate a spiralling circle of treachery that will last three decades and entwine many lives . . .

This is a powerful novel about the battle to save a great family of merchant bankers, infected by the poisons of ambition and greed.

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### THE CLIENT

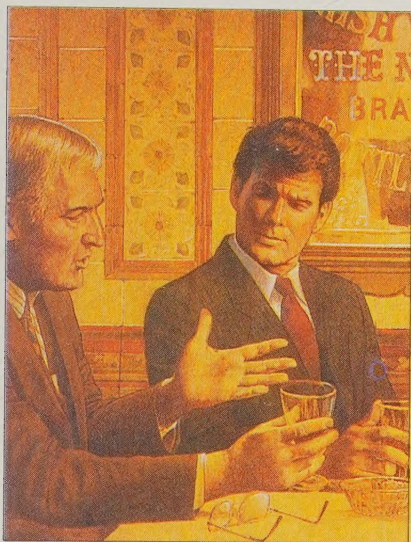
**John Grisham**

Eleven-year-old Mark Sway needs a lawyer—and fast. It's not that he's done anything wrong. It's what he knows. Like where mobster Barry 'the Blade' Muldanno has hidden the body of a United States senator. 'Talk,' say the police. 'Talk, and you die,' says Barry. For specialist child lawyer Reggie Love, Mark is the client of a lifetime. For the reader he's another unforgettable hero from the super best-selling author of *The Firm* and *The Pelican Brief*.

The compelling story of one small boy who stands up for himself and his family against all comers.

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## THE ESTUARY PILGRIM

**Douglas Skeggs**

The painting is a masterpiece—all shimmering light and sparkling water, radiant, intense. But is it a long-missing Monet or a clever forgery? When the man who claims to know the answer is found dead, art expert John Napier is horrified to discover that, in order to solve the mystery, he must also investigate a murder. He begins in Normandy, where the masterpiece disappeared in 1944.

Before he's finished, he will stir up explosive memories of the Nazi occupation in wartime France and finally uncover the scorching truth about *The Estuary Pilgrim*.

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## THE BEAR

**James Oliver Curwood**

In 1885 hunter Jim Langdon and his companions have come to the rugged Rocky Mountains of British Columbia, hot on the trail of a magnificent grizzly. The beast is a formidable adversary—a powerful creature standing nine foot tall, whose domain stretches across a wilderness of uninhabited valleys and mountain slopes. In the pursuit of his prey, Langdon will learn much about the grizzly—and finally something about himself as well.

The novel that inspired the spectacular hit film *The Bear*, this is a true classic of our time.

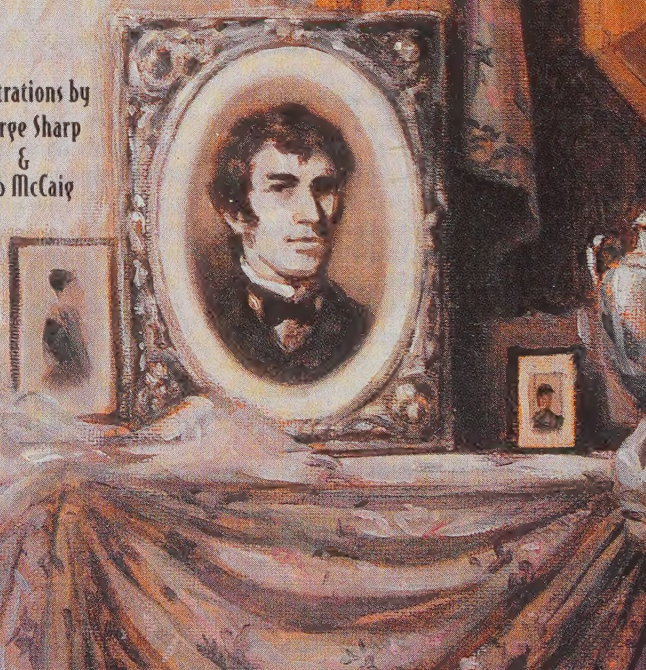
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# A Dangerous Fortune

Ken Follett

Illustrations by  
George Sharp  
&  
Rob McCaig







In the proper world of Victorian England they  
each have something to hide:

Augusta, the proud matriarch determined to  
protect her weakling son.

Hugh, the black-sheep cousin with financial  
talent and a sense of integrity.

Maisie, the beauty who rises from the slums  
to the inner circles of royalty.

Micky, the adventurer  
who manipulates them  
all for his own ends.

At stake: the control of  
a great merchant  
bank. But what  
finally matters  
more than riches  
is loyalty and love.



## Prologue – 1866

On the day of the tragedy, the boys of Windfield School had been confined to their rooms.

It was a hot Saturday in May, and they would normally have spent the afternoon playing cricket, but a crime had been committed. Six gold sovereigns had been stolen from the desk of Dr Offerton, the Latin master, and the whole school was under suspicion. The boys were to be kept in until the thief was caught.

Micky Miranda sat at a table scarred with the initials of generations of bored schoolboys. In his hand was a publication called *Equipment of Infantry*. Swords and rifles usually fascinated him, but he was too hot to concentrate. On the other side of the table his room-mate, Edward Pilaster, looked up from a Latin exercise book. He was copying Micky's translation of Plutarch, and now he pointed an inky finger and said, 'I can't read this word.'

Micky looked. 'Decapitated,' he said. 'It's the same word in Latin, *decapitare*.' Micky found Latin easy, perhaps because many of the words were similar in Spanish, his native language.

Edward's pen scratched on. Micky got up restlessly and went to the open window. There was no breeze. He looked wistfully across the stable yard to the woods. There was a shady swimming-hole in a disused quarry at the north end of Bishop's Wood.

'Let's go swimming,' he said suddenly. 'We can go out through the synagogue.' The 'synagogue' was the room next door, which was shared by three Jewish boys. Windfield School was tolerant of

religious differences, which was why it appealed to Jewish parents, to Edward's Methodist family, and to Micky's Catholic father. 'We can go through their window and drop onto the wash-house roof.'

Edward looked scared. 'It's the Striper if you're caught.'

The Striper was the ash cane wielded by the headmaster, Dr Poleson. The punishment for breaking detention was twelve agonising strokes. But the chance of getting caught was remote, and the idea of slipping naked into the pool was so immediate that Micky could almost feel the cold water on his sweaty skin.

He looked at his room-mate. Edward was not well liked at school: he was too lazy to be a good student, too clumsy to do well in games and too selfish to make many friends. Micky was the only friend he had, and Edward hated Micky to spend time with other boys. 'I'll see if Pilkington wants to go,' Micky said, and he went to the door.

'No, don't do that,' said Edward anxiously. 'I'll go.'

Micky opened the door. There was no one in the corridor. He darted into the next room. Edward followed. 'Hello, Hebrews,' Micky said.

Two of the boys were playing cards. They glanced up without speaking. The third, Fatty Greenbourne, was eating a cake. 'Hello, you two,' he said amiably. 'Want some cake?'

'By God, Greenbourne, you eat like a pig,' Micky said.

Fatty shrugged. He suffered a good deal of mockery, being fat as well as Jewish, but none of it seemed to touch him. His father was said to be the richest man in the world, and perhaps that made him impervious to name-calling, Micky thought. He went to the window, opened it and looked around. The stable yard was deserted. Fatty said, 'What are you fellows doing?'

'Going swimming,' said Micky. He sat on the windowsill, rolled over onto his stomach, wriggled backwards, then dropped the few inches onto the sloping roof of the wash-house. He glanced up and saw Edward looking anxiously out. 'Come on!' Micky said. He scrambled down the roof and used a convenient drainpipe to ease himself to the ground. A minute later Edward landed beside him. There was no one in sight. Without further hesitation Micky darted across the stable yard and into the woods. Edward came up beside him. 'We did it!' Micky said. 'Nobody spotted us.'

'We'll probably be caught going back in,' Edward said morosely.

Micky smiled at him. Edward was a big boy with wide shoulders, and very English-looking, with straight fair hair and blue eyes and a nose like a broad-bladed knife. He had no sense of style, and wore his clothes awkwardly. He and Micky were the same age, sixteen, but in

other ways they were different: Micky had curly dark hair and dark eyes, and he was meticulous about his appearance.

'Trust me, Pilaster,' Micky said. 'Don't I always take care of you?'

Edward grinned, mollified. 'All right, let's go.'

They followed a path through the wood. It was cooler under the leaves of the beech and elm trees, and Micky felt better. 'What will you do this summer?' he asked Edward.

'We usually go to Scotland in August.'

'Do your people have a shooting box there?' Micky had picked up the jargon of the English upper classes, and he knew that 'shooting box' was the correct term even if the house in question was a fifty-room castle. 'My father's not a sportsman,' Edward replied.

Micky heard a defensive note in Edward's voice and pondered its significance. He knew that the English aristocracy liked to shoot birds in August and hunt foxes all winter. He also knew that aristocrats did not send their sons to this school. The fathers of Windfield boys were businessmen not earls, and such men did not have time to waste hunting and shooting. The Pilasters were bankers, and when Edward said 'My father's not a sportsman' he was acknowledging that his family was not in the very highest rank of society. It amused Micky that Englishmen respected the idle more than people who worked. In his own country, people respected nothing but power. If a man had the power to control others—to feed or starve them, imprison or free them, kill them or let them live—what more did he need?

'What about you?' Edward said. 'How will you spend the summer?'

Micky had wanted him to ask that. 'Here,' he said. 'I have to. I can't go home. It takes six weeks one way—I'd have to start back before I got there.'

'By Jove, that's hard.'

In fact Micky had no wish to go back. He had loathed his home since his mother died. There were only men there now: his father, his older brother Paulo, and four hundred cowboys. Papa was a stranger to Micky: cold, unapproachable. But Micky's brother was the real problem. Paulo was stupid but strong. He hated Micky for being smarter, and he liked to humiliate his little brother. He never missed a chance to prove that Micky could not rope steers or break horses. No, Micky did not want to go home for the vacation. But he did not want to remain at school, either. What he really wanted was to spend the summer with the Pilaster family. Edward did not immediately suggest this, however, and Micky let the subject drop.

They clambered over a decaying picket fence and walked up a low hill. As they breasted the rise they came upon the swimming-hole.



The chiselled sides of the quarry were steep, but agile boys could scramble down. At the bottom was a deep pool of murky green water. To Micky's surprise, there were three boys in it.

He narrowed his eyes and peered at the naked figures. All three were in the lower fourth at Windfield. The mop of carrot-coloured hair belonged to Antonio Silva, who despite his colouring was a compatriot of Micky's from Cordova. Tonio's father did not have as much land as Micky's, but the Silvas lived in the capital and had influential friends. The second boy was Hugh Pilaster, a cousin of Edward's. There was no resemblance between the cousins: Hugh had black hair and small, neat features. Edward resented Hugh for being a good scholar and making Edward look like the dunce of the family. The other was Peter Middleton, a timid boy who attached himself to the more confident Hugh. All three had white, hairless thirteen-year-old bodies with thin arms and legs.

A fourth boy was swimming on his own at the far end of the pool. Micky could not see his face well enough to identify him.

Edward was grinning evilly. He had seen an opportunity to make mischief. He put his finger to his lips then started down the side of the quarry. Micky followed. They reached the ledge where the small boys had left their clothes. Tonio and Hugh were diving underwater, investigating something, while Peter swam quietly on his own. Peter was the first to spot the newcomers. 'Oh, no,' he said.

'Well, well,' said Edward. 'You boys are breaking bounds.'

Hugh Pilaster noticed his cousin, and shouted, 'So are you!'

'You'd better go back, before you're caught,' Edward said. He picked up a pair of trousers. 'But don't get your clothes wet, or everyone will know where you've been.' He threw the trousers into the pool and cackled with laughter.

'You cad!' Peter yelled as he made a grab for the floating trousers.

Micky smiled, amused. Hugh Pilaster scrambled out of the pool. He ran straight at Edward and gave him a mighty shove. Although Edward was bigger, he was caught off-balance. He staggered on the ledge then toppled over and fell into the pool with a terrific splash. Hugh snatched up an armful of clothes and went up the quarry side like a monkey. Peter and Tonio shrieked with mocking laughter.

Micky chased Hugh a short way but realised he could not hope to catch the smaller, nimbler boy. Turning back, he saw that Edward had surfaced and was ducking Peter Middleton's head again and again, punishing him for that mocking laugh.

Tonio swam to the edge of the pool, clutching a bundle of sodden clothing. 'Leave him alone, you big ape!' he yelled back at Edward.



Tonio had always been reckless and now Micky wondered what he would do next. Tonio went further along the side, then turned with a stone in his hand. Micky yelled to Edward, but it was too late. Tonio threw the stone and hit Edward on the head. A bright splash of blood appeared on his brow. Edward gave a roar of pain and, leaving Peter, struck out across the pool after Tonio.

HUGH RACED NAKED through the wood towards the school, clutching his clothes. Coming to a place where the path was crossed by another, he dodged to the left, ran a little way, then dived into the bushes and waited, trying to calm his hoarse breathing. His cousin Edward and Edward's crony, Micky Miranda, were the worst bullies in the school. He felt sure Edward would come after him. Edward had always hated Hugh.

Their fathers had quarrelled, too. Hugh's father, Toby, had taken his capital out of the family business and started his own enterprise, trading in textile dyes. Even at thirteen Hugh knew that the worst crime in the Pilaster family was to take your capital out of the bank. Edward's father, Joseph, had never forgiven his brother Toby.

Hugh wondered what had happened to his friends, and to the older boy, Albert Cammel, nicknamed Hump, who had been swimming alone at the far end. Hump had left his clothes in a different place, so he had probably escaped.

Hugh too had escaped, but he was not yet out of trouble. He would have to sneak into school in his soaking-wet clothes and hope he would not be seen. He groaned aloud at the thought.

At last he decided that Edward was not coming after him. He stood up and pulled on his wet trousers and shirt. Then he heard someone crying. Cautiously, he peeped out and saw Tonio's shock of carrot-coloured hair. His friend was walking slowly along the path, carrying his clothes and sobbing.

'What happened?' Hugh asked. 'Where's Peter?'

Tonio suddenly became fierce. 'I'll never tell, never!' he said. 'They'll kill me.'

'All right, don't tell me,' Hugh said. Tonio was usually brave to the point of recklessness, but he was terrified of Micky Miranda. Whatever had happened, Tonio would keep quiet about it. 'You'd better get dressed,' Hugh said practically.

Tonio looked blankly at the bundle of sodden garments in his arms. He seemed too shocked to sort them out. Hugh took them from him. He had boots and trousers and one sock, but no shirt. Hugh helped him put on what he had, then they walked towards the school.

Tonio stopped crying, though he still looked badly shaken. As they wound their way through the trees, Hugh wondered why his friend was so disturbed. After all, bullying was nothing new at Windfield. What had happened at the pool after Hugh had escaped?

The school was a collection of buildings that had once been a large farm, and their dormitory was in the old dairy near the chapel. The two boys had just reached their door when disaster struck. A familiar voice rang out: 'Pilaster Minor! Is that you?' And Hugh knew that the game was up. He turned. Dr Offerton had chosen that very moment to come out of the chapel, and now stood in the shadow of the porch, a tall figure in a college gown and mortarboard hat. Hugh stifled a groan. Dr Offerton, whose money had been stolen, was the least likely of all the masters to show mercy. It would be the Striper.

'Come here, Pilaster,' Dr Offerton said.

Hugh shuffled over to him, with Tonio following behind.

'Headmaster's study, right away,' said Dr Offerton.

'Yes, sir,' Hugh said miserably. When the head saw how he was dressed, he would probably be sacked from the school. And how would he explain it to his mother? The two boys turned away, but Dr Offerton said, 'Not you, Silva.'

Hugh and Tonio exchanged a quick mystified look. Why should Hugh be punished and not Tonio? But they could not question orders, and Tonio escaped into the dormitory while Hugh made for the head's house on the far side of the school compound.

The maid opened the door, and he met Dr Poleson in the hall. The headmaster was a bald man with a bulldog's face, but for some reason he did not look as angry as he should have. Instead of demanding to know why Hugh was out of his room *and* dripping wet, he simply opened the study door and said quietly, 'In here, young Pilaster.' Hugh went in with his heart pounding.

He was astonished to see his mother sitting there. Worse yet, she was weeping. 'I only went swimming!' he blurted out. Then he began to understand that this had nothing to do with his breaking detention. He had a dreadful feeling it was much worse than that.

'Mother, what is it?' he said. 'Why have you come?'

'Oh, Hugh,' she sobbed, 'your father's dead.'

SATURDAY WAS THE BEST day of the week for Maisie Robinson. On Saturday Papa got paid. Tonight there would be meat for supper, and new bread. She sat on the front doorstep with her brother, Danny, waiting for Papa to come home from work. Danny was thirteen, two years older than Maisie, and she thought he was wonderful.

The house was one of a row of damp dwellings in the dockland neighbourhood of a small town on the northeast coast of England. It belonged to Mrs MacNeil, a widow. She lived in the front room downstairs. The Robinsons lived in the back room and another family lived upstairs. When Papa arrived home, Mrs MacNeil would be on the doorstep, waiting to collect the rent.

Their name was not really Robinson, it was Rabinowicz. Mrs MacNeil had hated them ever since she discovered they were Jews. There were no other Jews in this town. The Robinsons had never intended to come here: they had paid for passage to Manchester, where there were lots of Jews, but the ship's captain had cheated them. When they discovered they were in the wrong place, Papa said they would save up enough money to move to Manchester; but then Mama had fallen ill. She was still ill, and they were still here.

Papa worked on the waterfront, in a warehouse with the words 'Tobias Pilaster & Co' in big letters over the gate. Maisie often wondered who Co was. Papa worked as a clerk, keeping records of the barrels of dyes that came in and out of the building. He was a careful man, a taker of notes and a maker of lists. Mama was the reverse. She was the daring one. It was Mama who wanted to come to England. Mama loved to meet new people, dress up and play games. That was why Papa loved her so much, Maisie thought: because she was something he could never be.

She was not spirited any more. She lay all day on the old mattress, drifting in and out of sleep, her pale face shiny with sweat. The doctor said she needed plenty of eggs and cream, and beef every day; and then Papa had paid him with the money for that night's dinner. On market day Maisie and Danny would go to town and pilfer potatoes and apples from the stalls in the square. Maisie was afraid of being caught because Mama would be so ashamed, but she was hungry too.

She looked up and saw some men coming along the street in a knot. They were talking angrily, waving their arms and shaking their fists. As they came closer she recognised Mr Ross, who lived upstairs and worked with Papa at Pilasters. When the group drew level with the house Mr Ross stomped inside, and Maisie and Danny had to dive out of the way to avoid his hobnailed boots.

When Maisie looked up again, she saw Papa. A thin man with a black beard and soft brown eyes, he was following the others at a distance, walking with his head bowed; he looked so dejected that Maisie wanted to cry. 'Papa, what's happened?' she said.

'Come inside.' His voice was so low Maisie could only just hear.

The two children followed him into the back of the house. He knelt

by the mattress and kissed Mama's lips. She woke up and smiled at him. He did not smile back. 'The firm's bust,' he said, speaking Yiddish. 'Toby Pilaster went bankrupt.'

Maisie was not sure what that meant but Papa's tone of voice made it sound like a disaster.

'But why?' Mama said.

'There's been a financial crash,' Papa said. 'A big bank in London failed yesterday.'

'So you've got no work?'

'No work, and no pay.'

'But today they've paid you.'

Papa bowed his head. 'No, they didn't pay us.'

'They must pay you,' Mama whispered. 'You worked all week.'

'They've no money. That's what bankrupt means, it means you owe people money and can't pay them.'

'But Mr Pilaster is a good man, you always said.'

'Toby Pilaster's dead. He hanged himself, last night, in his office in London. He had a son Danny's age.'

'But how are we to feed our children?'

'I don't know,' Papa said, and to Maisie's horror he began to cry. 'I'm sorry, Sarah,' he said as the tears rolled into his beard. 'I've failed you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' He leaned forward and buried his wet face in Mama's breast. She stroked his hair with a shaky hand.

Maisie was appalled. Papa never cried. It seemed to mean the end of any hope. Perhaps they would all die now. Danny stood up, looked at Maisie, and jerked his head towards the door. Together they tiptoed out of the room. Maisie sat on the front step and began to cry. 'What are we going to do?' she said.

'We'll have to run away,' Danny said.

Danny's words gave her a cold feeling in her chest. 'We can't.'

'We must. There's no food. If we stay we'll die.'

Maisie didn't care if she died, but a different thought occurred to her: Mama would surely starve herself to feed the children. If they stayed, she would die. They had to leave to save her. 'You're right,' Maisie said. 'If we go, perhaps Papa will be able to find enough food for Mama.' It was worse than the day they had left Viski, with the village houses burning behind them, for then she had known that Papa would look after her; now she had to take care of herself.

'Where will we go?' she said in a whisper.

'I'm going to America. There's a ship bound for Boston on the morning tide—I'll shin up a rope tonight and hide on deck in one of the boats.'

Looking at her brother, Maisie saw for the first time that there was the shadow of a moustache on his upper lip. He was becoming a man, and one day he would have a full black beard like Papa's. She understood she was not included in his plans, and she felt miserable. 'We're not going together, then,' she said sadly.

He looked guilty, but he did not contradict her. 'Go to Newcastle,' he said. 'It's a huge city, bigger than Gdansk—no one will notice you there. Cut your hair and pretend to be a boy. Go to a stables and help with the horses—you've always been good with horses. If they like you, you'll get tips. After a while they might give you a proper job.'

'I'd rather go with you,' Maisie said.

'You can't,' he said angrily.

She saw that his mind was made up. With dread in her heart she said, 'When should we go?'

'Now.'

'Should we take anything?'

'What?'

She shrugged. She had no spare clothes, no possessions. There was no food or money. 'I want to kiss Mama goodbye,' she said.

'Don't,' said Danny harshly. 'If you do, you'll stay.'

It was true. If she saw Mama she would break down. She swallowed hard. 'All right,' she said, fighting back tears. 'I'm ready.'

When they got to the end of the street she wanted to turn round and take a last look at the house; but she was afraid that if she did she would weaken; so she walked on, and never looked back.

FROM *The Times*:

CHARACTER OF THE ENGLISH SCHOOLBOY—The Deputy Coroner for Ashton, Mr H.S. Wasbrough, held an inquest yesterday at the Station Hotel, Windfield, on the body of Peter James St John Middleton, aged 13. The boy had been swimming in a pool at a disused quarry near Windfield School when two older boys had seen him apparently in difficulties, the court was told. One of the older boys, Miguel Miranda, a native of Cordova, gave evidence that his companion, Edward Pilaster, aged 16, dived in to try to save the younger boy, but to no avail. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death by drowning. The Deputy Coroner then called attention to the bravery of Edward Pilaster, and said the character of the English school-boy, as formed by such institutions as Windfield, was a thing of which we might justifiably feel proud.



MICKY MIRANDA WAS captivated by Edward's mother.

Augusta Pilaster was a tall, statuesque woman in her thirties. She had black hair and black eyebrows and a haughty, high-cheekboned face with a straight, sharp nose and a strong chin. She was not exactly beautiful, but somehow that proud face was deeply fascinating. She wore a black coat and a black hat to the inquest, and that made her even more dramatic. Yet what was so bewitching was the unmistakable feeling she gave Micky that the arrogant, imperious manner concealed a passionate nature. He could hardly take his eyes off her.

Beside her sat her husband Joseph, Edward's father, an ugly, sour-faced man of about forty. He had the same big blade of a nose as Edward, and the same fair colouring, but his blond hair was receding, and he had bushy Dundreary side-whiskers sprouting from his cheeks as if to compensate for his baldness. Micky wondered what had made such a splendid woman marry him. He was very rich—perhaps that was it.

They were returning to the school in a carriage hired from the Station Hotel: Mr and Mrs Pilaster, Edward and Micky, and the headmaster, Dr Poleson. The inquest had gone well. Micky had put on his most open and honest expression to tell the story he and Edward had made up, but inside he had been scared. The British could be very sanctimonious about telling the truth. But the court was so enchanted by the story of schoolboy heroism that no one questioned it. None of the other boys had been there. Hugh had left school because of the death of his father. Tonio was not asked to give evidence because nobody knew he had witnessed the death: Micky had scared him into silence. The other witness, the unknown boy at the far end of the pool, had not come forward.

Peter Middleton's parents were too grief-stricken to attend. They sent their lawyer, a sleepy-eyed old man whose only object was to get the whole thing over with a minimum of fuss. Peter's older brother David was there, and became agitated when the lawyer declined to ask Micky or Edward any questions, but to Micky's relief the old man waved aside his whispered protests.

In the head's drawing room Mrs Pilaster embraced Edward and kissed his forehead where Tonio's stone had hit him. Micky and Edward had not told anyone that Tonio had thrown a stone at Edward, for then they would have to explain why he did it. They had said that Edward banged his head when he dived in to rescue Peter.

As they drank their tea, Micky saw a new side to Edward. His mother, sitting beside him on the sofa, touched him constantly and called him Teddy. Instead of being embarrassed, as most boys would,



he seemed to like it, and kept giving her a winning little smile. She's stupid about him, Micky thought, and he loves it.

After a few minutes of small talk Mrs Pilaster stood up abruptly, startling the men, who scrambled to their feet. 'I'm sure you want to smoke, Dr Poleson,' she said. 'Mr Pilaster will take a turn around the garden with you and have a cigar. Teddy dear, go with your father. I should like a few minutes in the chapel. Perhaps Micky would show me the way.'

'By all means, by all means,' the head stuttered. 'Off you go, Miranda.'

Micky was impressed. How effortlessly she made them all do her bidding! Feeling pleased to be her escort, he led her to the school chapel. 'Shall I wait outside for you?' he offered.

'Come inside. I want to talk to you.'

The chapel was empty. She took a back pew and invited him to sit beside her. Looking into his eyes, she said, 'Now tell me the truth.'

Augusta saw a flash of fear in the boy's expression. However, he recovered in an instant. 'I've already told you the truth,' he said.

She shook her head. 'You have not.'

He smiled.

The smile took her by surprise. She had caught him out; she knew he was on the defensive; yet he could smile at her. Few men could resist the force of her will, but it seemed he was exceptional, despite his youth. 'How old are you?' she said.

'Sixteen.'

She studied him. He was outrageously good-looking, with his curly dark brown hair and smooth skin, although there was already a hint of decadence in the heavy-lidded eyes and full lips. He reminded her of the Earl of Strang and she thought of herself when she was sixteen, lying on a river bank in a raspberry-pink dress and a straw hat, being kissed by the young earl . . . She pushed that thought aside with a guilty pang. 'Peter Middleton was not in difficulties when you arrived at the pool,' she said.

'What makes you say this?' he said coolly.

He was scared, she sensed, but he maintained his composure. 'You're forgetting that my nephew was there. His father took his own life last week, as you probably heard, and that is why he isn't here. But he has spoken to his mother, who is my sister-in-law.'

'What did he say?'

'He said that Edward threw Peter's clothes into the water.'

'And then?'

Augusta smiled. This boy was taking control of the conversation.

She was supposed to be questioning him, but instead he was interrogating her. 'Just tell me what really happened,' she said.

He nodded. 'Very well.'

Augusta was relieved, but worried. She wanted to know the truth, but she feared what it might be. Poor Teddy—he had almost died, as a baby, because there had been something wrong with her breast milk. He nearly wasted away before the doctors discovered the problem and proposed a wet nurse. Ever since then he had been vulnerable, needing her special protection.

'Edward didn't mean any harm,' Micky said. 'He was just ragging. He threw the clothes into the water as a joke.'

Augusta nodded. That sounded normal: boys teasing one another. 'Then Hugh pushed Edward in.'

'That little Hugh has always been a troublemaker,' Augusta said.

'The other boys laughed, and Edward pushed Peter's head under, to teach him a lesson. Hugh ran off. Then Tonio threw a stone at Edward and he went chasing after Tonio. I was watching them: no one was looking at Peter Middleton. Tonio got away from Edward eventually. That was when we noticed that Peter had gone quiet. We don't really know what happened to him: perhaps Edward's ducking exhausted him. Anyway, he was floating face down. We got him out of the water right away, but he was dead.'

It was hardly Edward's fault, Augusta thought. All the same she was deeply grateful that this story had not come out at the inquest. Micky had covered up for Edward, thank heavens. 'What about the other boys?' she said. 'They must know what happened.'

'It was lucky that Hugh left the school that very day.'

'And the other one—did you call him Tony?'

'Antonio Silva. Tonio for short. Don't worry about him. He's from my country. He'll do as I tell him.'

There was something chilling in the boy's voice as he said this, and Augusta shivered.

'May I fetch you a shawl?' Micky said attentively.

Augusta shook her head. 'No other boys saw what happened?'

Micky frowned. 'There was another boy in the pool. I couldn't see his face.'

'Did he see what happened?'

'I don't know. I'm not sure at what point he left. But he hasn't come forward as a witness, so I suppose he's no danger to us.'

*No danger to us.* It struck Augusta that she was involved with this boy in something dishonest, possibly illegal. She looked hard at him and said, 'What do you want?'

Looking bewildered, he said, 'What do you mean?'

'You covered up for my son. You committed perjury today.' He was unbalanced by her directness. That pleased her: she was in control again. 'I think you want something in return.'

She saw his gaze drop momentarily to her bosom, and for a wild moment she thought he was going to make an indecent suggestion. Then he said, 'I want to spend the summer with Edward.'

Suddenly he was a schoolboy again. She had thought he would ask for money, or perhaps a job at Pilasters Bank. This seemed such a small, almost childish request. 'You shall stay with us for the summer, and welcome,' she said. The thought did not displease her. His manners were perfect and he was good-looking: it would be no hardship to have him as a guest.

Micky smiled, showing white teeth. He got up from the pew where they were sitting. 'Thank you,' he said, and offered his hand.

She took it. 'I'm grateful to you, for protecting Teddy.'

He bent down, as if he were going to kiss her hand; and then, to her astonishment, he kissed her lips. It was so quick that she had no time to turn away. A moment later he was gone.

## Part One – 1873

### MAY

When Micky Miranda was twenty-three his father came to London to buy rifles. Señor Carlos Raul Xavier Miranda, known always as Papa, was a short man with massive shoulders. His tanned face was carved in lines of brutality. In leather chaps and a broad-brimmed hat, seated on a chestnut stallion, he made a commanding figure; but in Hyde Park, wearing a frock coat and a top hat, he felt foolish, and that made him dangerously bad-tempered.

They were not alike. Micky was tall and slim, with regular features, and he was deeply attached to the refinements of London life: beautiful clothes, polite manners, and indoor plumbing. His great fear was that Papa would want to take him back to Cordova. Micky would go home one day, but it would be as an important man in his own right, not as the younger son of Papa Miranda. Meanwhile he had to persuade his father that he was more useful here in London.

They were walking along South Carriage Drive on a sunny Saturday afternoon. The park was thronged with well-dressed Londoners, enjoying the warm weather. But Papa was not enjoying

himself. 'I must have those rifles!' he muttered to himself in Spanish.

Micky spoke in the same language. 'You could buy them back home,' he said tentatively.

'Two thousand of them?' Papa said. 'Perhaps, but everyone would know about it.'

So he wanted to keep it secret. Micky had no idea what Papa was up to. Why did Papa suddenly need so much ordnance? There had been no war in Cordova since the now-legendary March of the Cowboys, when Papa had led his men across the Andes to liberate Santamaria Province from its Spanish overlords. Who were the guns for? Papa had not volunteered the information and Micky was afraid to ask. He said, 'Anyway, you couldn't get such high-quality weapons at home.'

'That's true,' said Papa. 'The Westley-Richards is the finest rifle I've ever seen. But how can they ask for the money before the guns are delivered?'

Micky had been able to help Papa with his choice of rifles. Papa needed short-barrelled rifles that would not be too cumbersome for men on horseback. Micky had taken him to a factory in Birmingham and shown him the Westley-Richards carbine with the breech-loading action. But Papa knew nothing about international trade, and he had assumed the manufacturer would accept payment in Cordova. On the contrary, the payment was required before the weapons left the Birmingham factory.

'We'll solve this problem, Papa,' Micky said soothingly. 'That's what merchant banks are for.'

'Go over it again,' Papa said. 'Make sure I understand this.'

Micky was pleased to be able to explain something to Papa. 'The bank will pay the manufacturer in Birmingham. It will arrange for the guns to be shipped to Cordova. When they arrive, the bank will accept payment from you at their office there.'

'How do they make a living?'

'They take a cut of everything. They will pay the rifle manufacturer a discounted price, take a commission on the shipping and insurance, and charge you extra for the guns.'

Papa nodded. He was trying not to show it, but he was impressed.

They left the park and walked along Kensington Gore to the home of Joseph and Augusta Pilaster.

In the seven years since Peter Middleton drowned, Micky had spent every vacation with the Pilasters. After school he had toured Europe with Edward for a year, and he had roomed with Edward during three years at Oxford University, drinking and gambling and raising

Cain, making only the barest pretence of being students.

Micky had never again kissed Augusta. He would have liked to. And he sensed that she might let him. But he had held back out of prudence. He had been accepted almost as a son in one of the richest families in England; it would be insane to jeopardise that cherished position by seducing Joseph Pilaster's wife.

Edward's parents had recently moved into a new house. Kensington Gore, which not long ago had been a country road leading through fields to the village of Kensington, was now lined, along its south side, by splendid mansions. On the north side were Hyde Park and the gardens of Kensington Palace. It was the perfect location for the home of a rich commercial family.

Micky was not so sure about the architecture. It was certainly striking. It was of red brick and white stone, with big leaded windows on the ground and first floors. Above the first floor was a huge gable, its triangular shape enclosing three rows of windows—six, then four, then two at the apex. The sides of the gable were stepped, and on the steps were perched stone animals: lions and dragons and monkeys. At the very top was a ship in full sail.

'I'm sure there's not another house like this in London,' Micky said as he and his father stood outside staring at it.

Papa replied in Spanish. 'No doubt that is what the lady intended.'

Micky nodded. Papa had Augusta's measure already.

Augusta was having a drum, an afternoon tea party, to show off her house. The oak-panelled hall was jammed with people. Micky and his father handed their hats to a footman, then pushed through the crowd to the vast drawing room at the back of the house. The French windows were open, and the party spilled out onto a flagged terrace and garden. Micky had deliberately chosen to introduce his father at a crowded occasion, for Papa's manners were not always up to London standards. He insisted on carrying his pistol beneath his coat at all times.

Papa did not need Micky to point Augusta out to him. She stood in the centre of the room, draped in a royal-blue silk dress with a low square neckline. As Papa shook her hand she gazed at him with her hypnotic dark eyes and said in a low, velvet voice, 'Señor Miranda—what a pleasure to meet you. Micky has often spoken of you and your splendid ranch.'

Papa was immediately entranced. He bowed low over her hand. 'You must come and visit us one day.'

God forbid, Micky thought. Augusta in Cordova would be as out of place as a flamingo in a coal mine. Papa could be charming when it



suiting him, and he was now playing the role of romantic South American grandee for Augusta's benefit. 'We would welcome you like the queen you are,' he said in a low voice; and now it was obvious that he was making up to her.

But Augusta was a match for him. 'What a tempting prospect,' she said with an insincerity that went right over Papa's head. Then she looked over his shoulder and cried, 'Why, Captain Tillotson, how kind of you to come!' And she left to greet the latest arrival.

Papa was bereft. It took him a moment to regain his composure. Then he said abruptly, 'Take me to the head of the bank.'

'Certainly,' Micky said nervously. He looked around for old Seth. The entire Pilaster clan was here, including maiden aunts, in-laws and second cousins. Most of the other guests were business connections, Micky judged—and rivals, too, he thought as he saw the thin, upright figure of Ben Greenbourne, head of Greenbournes Bank. Ben was the father of Solomon, the boy Micky had known as Fatty Greenbourne. They had lost touch since school: Fatty had not studied at a university, but had gone straight into his father's business.

The aristocracy thought it vulgar to talk about money, but this group had no such inhibitions, and Micky kept hearing the word 'crash'. In the newspapers it was sometimes spelt 'Krach' because it had started in Austria. Share prices were down and the bank rate was up, according to Edward, who had recently started work at the family bank. Some were alarmed, but the Pilasters felt confident that London would not be pulled down with Vienna.

Micky took Papa out through the French windows onto the paved terrace, where wooden benches were placed in the shade of striped awnings. There they found old Seth, sitting with a rug over his knees despite the warm spring weather. He was weak from some unspecified illness, and he looked as frail as an eggshell, but he had the Pilaster nose, a big curved blade that made him formidable still.

'Mr Pilaster, may I present my father, Señor Carlos Miranda, who is over from Cordova for a visit.'

Seth shook Papa's hand. 'Cordova, eh? My bank has an office in your capital city, Palma.'

'I go to the capital very little,' Papa said. 'I have a ranch in Santamaria Province.'

'So you're in the beef business.'

'Yes.'

'Look into refrigeration.'

Papa was baffled. Micky explained, 'Someone has invented a machine for keeping meat cold. If they can install it in ships, we will



be able to send fresh meat all over the world without salting it.'

Papa frowned. 'This could be bad for us. I have a big salting plant.'

'Knock it down,' said Seth. 'Go in for refrigeration.'

Papa did not like people telling him what to do, and Micky felt anxious. He spotted Edward. 'Papa, I want you to meet my best friend,' he said. He eased his father away from Seth. 'Allow me to present Edward Pilaster.'

Papa examined Edward with a cold, clear-eyed gaze. Edward was not good-looking, but he looked like a healthy farm boy, muscular and fair-skinned. Papa shook his hand and Micky said, 'May we talk business for a moment?'

They stepped off the terrace and onto the newly laid lawn. 'Papa has made a large purchase here, and he needs to arrange shipping and finance,' Micky went on. 'It could be the first piece of business you bring in to your bank.'

Edward looked keen. 'I'll be glad to handle that for you. What is the cargo?'

'Rifles.'

Edward's face fell. 'Oh. Then I can't help you.'

Micky was mystified. 'Why?'

'Because of old Seth. He's a Methodist, you know. Well, the whole family is, but he's rather more devout than most. Anyway, he won't finance arms sales, and as he's senior partner, that's bank policy.'

Micky had a sinking feeling in his stomach. 'The damned old hypocrite is practically dead, why should he interfere?'

'He is about to retire,' Edward pointed out. 'But I think Uncle Samuel will take over, and he's the same, you know.'

Worse and worse. Samuel was Seth's bachelor son, fifty-three years old and in perfect health. 'We'll just have to go to another merchant bank,' Micky said.

Edward said, 'That should be straightforward, provided you can give a couple of sound business references.'

'References? Why?'

'A bank needs some assurance that they're dealing with a respectable businessman.'

Edward did not realise that the concept of a respectable businessman did not yet exist in South America. Papa was a *caudillo*, a provincial landowner with a hundred thousand acres of pampas and a work force of cowboys that doubled as his private army. He wielded power in a way the British had not known since the Middle Ages. It was like asking William the Conqueror for references. Micky pretended to be unperturbed. 'No doubt we can provide something,' he said.

In fact he was stumped. But if he was going to stay in London he had to bring this deal off.

They strolled back towards the crowded terrace, Micky hiding his anxiety. Papa had not understood the conversation, but Micky would have to explain it later—and then there would be trouble. Papa had no patience with failure.

Augusta appeared and spoke to Edward. 'Find Hasteed for me, Teddy darling,' she said. Hasteed was her obsequious Welsh butler. 'There's no cordial left and the wretched man has disappeared.' Edward went off. She favoured Papa with a warm smile, then looked at Micky. Always quick to sense other people's moods, she said, 'You're not enjoying the party. What's the matter?'

He did not hesitate to confide in her. 'I was hoping Papa could help Edward by bringing new business to the bank, but it involves guns and Edward has just explained that Seth won't finance weapons.'

'Seth won't be senior partner much longer,' Augusta said.

'Apparently Samuel feels the same as his father.'

'Does he?' Augusta said, and her tone was arch. 'And who says that Samuel is to be the next senior partner?'

HUGH PILASTER WAS WEARING a new sky-blue ascot-style cravat, slightly puffed at the neckline and held in place with a pin. He really should have been wearing a new coat, but he earned only sixty-eight pounds a year, so he had to brighten up his old clothes with a new tie. The ascot was the latest fashion, and sky-blue was a daring colour choice; but when he spied his reflection in the huge mirror over the mantelpiece in Aunt Augusta's drawing room he saw that the blue tie and black suit looked rather fetching with his blue eyes and black hair, and he hoped the ascot gave him an attractively rakish air.

It was a bit embarrassing, living with Augusta and being so poor; but there was a tradition at Pilasters Bank that everyone started at the bottom. Hugh was doing the work of an apprentice clerk, and was paid accordingly, so his aunt and uncle had to put up with his looking a little shabby.

It would never have occurred to them to solve the problem by giving him money. His father had withdrawn his capital from the family business, started his own enterprise, gone bankrupt and killed himself. His father had been the victim of a financial crisis, but that made no difference. He had failed on May 11, 1866, a date known to bankers as Black Friday. On that day a bill broker called Overend & Gurney Ltd had gone bankrupt for five million pounds, and many firms were dragged down, including Tobias Pilaster & Co. That was

why Hugh had left the expensive Windfield boarding school and become a dayboy at the Folkestone Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen; it was why he started work at nineteen instead of wasting a few years at a university; it was why he lived with his aunt; and it was why he did not have new clothes to wear to the party. He was a relation, but a poor one; an embarrassment to a family whose pride, confidence and social standing were based on its wealth.

Well, I'm a Pilaster too, Hugh thought. There was a rage that boiled in his heart sometimes when he brooded about what had happened to his father, and it made him all the more determined to become the richest and most respected of the whole damn crew. Finance was in his blood. He was determined he would never be as smug and hypocritical as his older relatives, but all the same he was going to be a banker.

He stepped out of the drawing room onto the terrace and saw Augusta bearing down on him with a girl in tow. 'Dear Hugh,' she said, 'here's your friend Miss Bodwin.'

Hugh groaned inwardly. Rachel Bodwin was a tall, intellectual girl of radical opinions. She was not pretty—she had dull brown hair and light eyes set rather close together—but she was lively and interesting, full of subversive ideas, and Hugh had liked her a lot when he first came to London to work at the bank. But Augusta had decided he should marry Rachel, and that had ruined the relationship. Before that they had argued fiercely about divorce, religion and votes for women. Since Augusta had begun her campaign to bring them together, they just stood and exchanged awkward chitchat.

'How lovely you look, Miss Bodwin,' he said automatically.

'You're very kind,' she replied in a bored tone.

Augusta was turning away when she caught sight of Hugh's tie. 'Heavens!' she exclaimed. 'What is that? You look like an innkeeper!'

Hugh blushed crimson. 'It's a new tie. It's called an ascot.'

'Give it to the bootboy tomorrow,' she said, and she turned away.

Resentment flared in Hugh's breast against the fate that forced him to live with his overbearing aunt. 'Women ought not to comment on a man's clothes,' he said moodily. 'It's not ladylike.'

Rachel said, 'I think women should comment on anything that interests them, so I shall say that I like your tie, and that it matches your eyes.'

Hugh smiled at her, feeling better. She was very nice, after all. However, it was not her niceness that caused Augusta to want him to marry her. Rachel was the daughter of a lawyer specialising in commercial contracts. Her family had no money other than her

father's professional income, and on the social ladder they were several rungs below the Pilasters; indeed they would not be at this party at all except that Mr Bodwin had done useful work for the bank. By marrying Rachel, Hugh would confirm his status as a lesser breed of Pilaster; and that was what Augusta wanted.

AUGUSTA WAS VERY FOND of Micky Miranda. He had a way of looking at her as if she were the most desirable thing he had ever seen. There were times when she wished he would do more than just look. It was a foolish wish, of course, but all the same she felt it now and again. She had been alarmed by their conversation about Seth. Micky assumed that when old Seth died or retired, his son Samuel would take over as senior partner of Pilasters Bank. Micky would not have made that assumption on his own: he must have picked it up from the family. Augusta did not want Samuel to take over. She wanted the job for her husband Joseph, who was Seth's nephew.

She glanced through the drawing-room window and saw the four partners together on the terrace. Three were Pilasters: Seth, Samuel and Joseph—the early nineteenth-century Methodists had favoured biblical names. Old Seth looked like the invalid he was, sitting with a blanket over his knees. Beside him was his son. Samuel was not as distinguished-looking as his father. He had the same beaklike nose, but below it was a rather soft mouth with bad teeth. Augusta's husband Joseph was making a point to his uncle and cousin with characteristically impatient movements of his hand. He, too, had the Pilaster nose, but the rest of his features were rather irregular and he was losing his hair. The fourth partner was standing back, listening. He was Major George Hartshorn, husband of Madeleine, Joseph's sister. A former army officer, he had a prominent scar on his forehead from a wound received twenty years ago in the Crimean War. He had retired from the army and joined the bank when he married Madeleine. An amiable man, he was not clever enough to run the bank, and anyway they had never had a senior partner whose name was not Pilaster. The only serious candidates were Samuel and Joseph. Technically, the decision would be made by a vote of the partners. In reality, Augusta was determined to have her way. But it would not be easy.

The senior partner of Pilasters Bank was one of the most important people in the world. Along with a handful of others—J. P. Morgan, the Rothschilds, Ben Greenbourne—he held the prosperity of nations in his hands. He was consulted by prime ministers and courted by diplomats; and his wife was fawned upon by all. Joseph wanted the

job, but it would not occur to him that there were things he should do to make sure he got it.

She had no trouble identifying Samuel's weakness. At the age of fifty-three he was a bachelor, and lived with a young man who was blithely referred to as his 'secretary'. Until now the family had paid no attention to Samuel's domestic arrangements, but Augusta was planning to change all that.

As she moved among her guests, she spotted her sister-in-law, Madeleine Hartshorn. Poor Madeleine, you could tell she was Joseph's sister, for she had the Pilaster nose. On some of the men it looked distinguished, but no woman could look anything but plain with a great beak like that. She took Madeleine's arm, saying, 'Come and see my room—I think you'll like it.'

Augusta had furnished her bedroom in the latest Japanese style, with peacock-feather wallpaper, a display of porcelain over the mantelpiece, and dragonfly curtains.

'Augusta, how daring!' said Madeleine.

'Thank you.' Augusta was almost completely happy with the effect. While Madeleine admired a lacquered display cabinet, Augusta said softly, 'Madeleine, dear, what *are* we going to do about Cousin Samuel and his "secretary"?'

Madeleine looked puzzled. 'Ought we to do something?'

'If Samuel is to become senior partner, we must.'

'Why?'

'My dear, the senior partner of Pilasters must be quite, *quite* irreproachable in his private life.'

Comprehension dawned, and Madeleine flushed. 'Surely you're not suggesting that Samuel is in some way . . . depraved?'

That was exactly what Augusta was suggesting, but she did not want to say it outright. 'I trust that I shall never know,' she said evasively. 'The important thing is what people think.'

Madeleine looked worried, but before she could say anything Augusta ushered her out of the room, saying, 'Now I must return to my guests.' She had said enough to Madeleine about Cousin Samuel. At this stage all she wanted was to plant the seed of doubt: anything more might be too heavy-handed.

MICKY AND HIS FATHER left the party and set out to walk back to their lodgings. Their route lay entirely through parks—first Hyde Park, then Green Park and St James's Park—until they reached the river. They stopped in the middle of Westminster Bridge to rest for a spell and look at the view.



On the north shore of the river was the greatest city in the world. Upstream were the Houses of Parliament, built in modern imitation of the neighbouring Westminster Abbey. Downstream they could see the gardens of Whitehall and the vast brick edifice of the new Charing Cross railway station. The river was busy with small boats and pleasure cruisers, a pretty sight in the evening sun.

The southern shore might have been in a different country. It was the site of the Lambeth potteries. The smell was strong even here on the bridge, a quarter of a mile away. Squat hovels were crowded around the walls of Lambeth Palace, the London home of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Micky's lodgings were in Camberwell, a respectable suburb beyond the potteries, but he and his father lingered on the bridge. Micky was still cursing old Seth for frustrating his plans. 'We will solve this problem about the rifles, Papa,' he said.

Papa shrugged. 'Who is standing in our way?' he asked.

It was a simple question, but it had a deep meaning in the Miranda family. When they had an intractable problem, they asked, *Who is standing in our way?* It really meant, *Who do we have to kill to get this done?* In Cordova Papa's reckless brutality had made him a man to be feared. In England it would get him thrown in jail. 'I don't anticipate the need for drastic action,' Micky said, trying to cover his nervousness with an air of unconcern.

'For now, there is no hurry,' Papa said. 'Winter is beginning at home. There will be no fighting until the summer.' He gave Micky a hard look. 'But I *must* have the rifles by the end of October.'

That look made Micky feel weak at the knees. He leaned against the stone parapet of the bridge to steady himself. 'I'll see to it, Papa.'

Papa nodded as if there could be no doubt about it. They were silent for a minute. Then Papa said, 'I want you to stay in London.'

Micky felt his shoulders slump with relief.

Then Papa dropped his bombshell. 'But your allowance will stop.' 'What?'

'The family can't keep you. You must support yourself.'

Micky was appalled. Papa's meanness was as legendary as his violence, but still this was unexpected. The Mirandas were rich. Papa had thousands of head of cattle, monopolised all horse dealing over a huge territory and owned most of the stores in Santamaria Province. It was true their money did not buy much in England. That had come as a blow to Micky when he went to Windfield. He had managed to supplement his allowance by playing cards, but he had found it hard to make ends meet until he befriended Edward. Even now Edward

paid for all the expensive entertainments they shared: the opera, visits to racecourses, hunting and whores. Still, Micky needed a basic income to pay his rent, tailor's bills, subscriptions to the gentlemen's clubs that were an essential element of London life.

He was about to ask how he was expected to live on no money when Papa abruptly changed the subject and said, 'I will now tell you what the rifles are for. We are going to take over the desert.'

Micky did not understand. Bordering the Miranda land was a smaller property owned by the Delabarca family. To the north of both was land so arid that neither Papa nor his neighbour had ever bothered to claim it. 'What do we want the desert for?' Micky said.

'Beneath the dust there is a mineral called nitrate. It's used as a fertiliser. It can be shipped all over the world and sold for high prices. I want you to stay in London and take charge of selling it.'

'How do we know this stuff is there?'

'Delabarca has started mining it,' Papa said. 'It has made his family rich. Wealth is power, and the Delabarcas will soon be stronger than we are. We have to destroy them.'

## JUNE

The Argyll Rooms were the most popular place of entertainment in London, but Hugh had never been there. It would never have occurred to Hugh to visit such a place: although not actually a brothel like the famous Nellie's, it had a low reputation. However, Edward had casually invited Hugh to join him and Micky for the evening, and somehow they had ended up here.

The ballroom was an extravagantly gas-lit arena, with huge gilt mirrors intensifying the brilliant light. The dance floor was crowded with couples, and behind an elaborate gold trelliswork screen a half-concealed orchestra was playing a vigorous polka. The three of them wore evening dress, a sign that they were upper-class people going slumming; but most of the men wore respectable black daytime suits, identifying them as clerks and small businessmen. The girls were all dressed up to the nines, in evening gowns with bustles, many of them cut very low at the neckline, and the most amazing hats. But Hugh noticed that on the dance floor they all modestly wore their cloaks. The atmosphere was a curious but exciting mixture of respectability and licence.

The polka ended and some of the dancers returned to their tables. Edward pointed and cried, 'There's Fatty Greenbourne!'

Hugh followed his finger and saw their old schoolmate, bigger than ever, bulging out of his white waistcoat. On his arm was a stunningly beautiful girl. They sat down at a table, and Micky said, 'Why don't we join them?'

Hugh was keen for a closer look at the girl, and he assented readily. The three young men threaded their way through the tables. 'Good evening, Fatty!' Edward said cheerily.

'Hello, you lot,' he replied. 'I'm Solly nowadays,' he added amiably.

'We thought we'd join you,' Edward said, and looked at the girl.

Solly turned to his companion. 'Miss Robinson, may I present some old schoolfriends: Edward Pilaster, Hugh Pilaster and Micky Miranda.'

Miss Robinson's reaction was startling. She went pale beneath her rouge and said, 'Pilaster? Not the same family as Tobias Pilaster?'

'My father,' said Hugh. 'How do you know the name?'

She recovered her composure quickly. 'My father used to work for Tobias Pilaster and Co. As a child, I wondered who Co was.' They laughed, and the tension passed. She added, 'Would you lads like to sit down?'

There was a bottle of champagne on the table. Solly poured some for Miss Robinson and called for more glasses. 'Well, this is a real reunion,' he said. 'Guess who else is here: Tonio Silva.'

'Where?' said Micky quickly. He seemed displeased to hear that Tonio was around, and Hugh wondered why.

'He's on the dance floor,' Solly said. 'He's with Miss Robinson's friend, Miss April Tilsley.'

Miss Robinson said, 'You could call me Maisie. I'm not a *formal* girl.' And she threw a lascivious wink at Solly.

Hugh studied Maisie Robinson. Her tawny hair was piled into a high chignon and topped with a huge hat decorated with artificial leaves and fruit. Underneath the hat was a small, impudent face with a wicked twinkle in the green eyes. Hugh could hardly take his eyes off her. After a while Maisie felt his stare and returned it. He turned away with an apologetic smile.

The next dance ended and Tonio Silva came to the table with April Tilsley. Hugh had run into Tonio several times since school, but even if he had not seen him for years he would have recognised him instantly by the shock of carrot-coloured hair. They had been best friends until that awful day in 1866 when Hugh's mother had come to

tell him that his father was dead and to take him away from the school. Hugh had often wondered what had really happened that day at the swimming-hole. He had never believed the newspaper story about Edward trying to rescue Peter Middleton: Edward did not have the courage. But Tonio still would not speak of it.

Hugh studied Tonio's face as he shook hands with Micky. His expression showed a mixture of fear and admiration. His companion, April, was a little older than Maisie, Hugh judged, and there was a pinched, sharp look about her that made her less attractive.

Hugh turned back to Maisie. She was talkative and vivacious, with a lilting voice that had a trace of the accent of northeast England, where Tobias Pilaster's warehouses had been. Her expression was endlessly fascinating as she smiled, pouted, wrinkled her turned-up nose and rolled her eyes. She had fair eyelashes, he noticed, and there were freckles on her nose. She was an unconventional beauty but no one would deny she was the prettiest woman in the room.

She caught his eye again, and he had the embarrassing feeling that she knew what he was thinking. He searched desperately for something to say, and finally blurted out, 'Have you always lived in London, Miss Robinson?'

'Only for three days,' she said.

'Maisie's been with a circus for four years,' April explained.

'Heavens! Doing what?'

'Bareback horse-riding,' Maisie said. 'Standing on the horses, jumping from one to another, all those tricks.'

'How did you get into that line of work?' Hugh asked.

She hesitated, then seemed to make up her mind about something. She faced Hugh directly, a dangerous glint in her eyes. 'It was like this,' she said. 'My father worked for Tobias Pilaster and Co. Your father cheated my father out of a week's wages. At that time my mother was sick. Without that money, either I would starve or she would die. So I ran away from home. I was eleven years old.'

Hugh felt his face flush. 'I don't believe my father cheated anyone,' he said. 'And if you were eleven you can't possibly have understood what happened.'

'I understood hunger and cold!'

'Perhaps your father was at fault,' Hugh persisted, though he knew it was unwise. 'He shouldn't have had children if he couldn't afford to feed them.'

'He could feed them!' Maisie blazed. 'He worked like a slave—and then you stole his money!'

'My father went bankrupt, but he never stole.'

'It's the same thing when you're the loser!'

'It's not the same, and you're foolish and insolent to pretend it is.' Hugh knew he should stop but he was angry. 'Ever since I was thirteen years old I've had to listen to the Pilaster family running my father down but I'm not going to take it from a circus performer.'

Maisie stood up, her eyes flashing like cut emeralds. She said, 'Dance with me, Solly. Perhaps your rude friend will have gone when the music stops.'

HUGH'S QUARREL WITH MAISIE broke up the party. Solly and Maisie went off on their own, and the others decided to go ratting. Ratting was against the law, but there were half a dozen regular pits within five minutes of Piccadilly Circus, and Micky Miranda knew them all.

It was dark when they emerged from the Argyll Rooms into the district of London known as Babylon. Here, out of sight of the palaces of Mayfair, but conveniently close to the gentlemen's clubs of St James's, was a warren of narrow streets dedicated to gambling, blood sports, opium smoking, pornography, and, most of all, prostitution. It was a hot sweaty night, and the air was heavy with the smells of cooking, beer and drains. Micky led his friends into a narrow alley. The eyes of cats blinked at him from piles of refuse. Checking that the others were in tow, he entered a dingy pub, walked through the bar and out the back door. He crossed a yard and opened the door of a ramshackle wooden building like a stable. A dirty-faced man in a long, greasy coat demanded fourpence as the price of admission. Edward paid and they went in.

The place was brightly lit and full of tobacco smoke. Forty or fifty men of all classes and a few women stood round a circular pit. Several men had dogs with them, carried in their arms or tied to chair legs.

Micky pointed out a bearded man in a tweed cap who held a muzzled dog on a chain. Some spectators were examining the dog. It was a squat, muscular animal with a big head and a powerful jaw. 'He'll be on next,' Micky said.

Edward went off to buy drinks from a woman with a tray. Micky turned to Tonio and addressed him in Spanish. It was bad form to do this in front of Hugh and April, who could not understand; but Hugh was a nobody and April was even less, so it hardly mattered. 'What are you doing these days?' he asked.

'I'm an attaché to the Cordovan Minister in London,' Tonio replied.

'Really?' Micky was intrigued. 'What do you have to do?'



'I answer letters from British firms that want to do business in Cordova,' Tonio lowered his voice. 'Don't tell a soul, but I have to write only two or three letters most days.'

'Do they pay you?'

'No. But I have a room at the minister's residence, and all my meals; plus an allowance for clothing. They also pay my subscriptions to clubs.'

Micky was envious. It was just the job for him. He wondered if there might be some way Tonio could be eased out of the post.

Edward came back with five tots of brandy and handed them round. Micky swallowed his at once. It was cheap and fiery.

Suddenly the dog growled and started to run in frantic circles, pulling on its chain. Micky looked round to see two men coming in carrying a cage of huge rats. The rats were even more frenzied than the dog, running over and under one another and squeaking with terror. The entrance was locked from the inside, and the man in the greasy coat started to take bets. Hugh Pilaster said, 'By Jove, I never saw such big rats. Where do they get them?'

Edward answered him. 'They're specially bred,' he said, and turned to speak to one of the handlers. 'How many this contest?'

'Six dozen,' the man replied.

Edward explained, 'That means they will put seventy-two rats into the pit.'

Tonio said, 'How does the betting work?'

'You can bet on the dog or the rats,' Edward explained, 'and if you think the rats will win, you can bet on how many will be left when the dog dies.'

The dirty man was calling out odds and taking money in exchange for scraps of paper on which he scribbled numbers. Edward put a sovereign on the dog, and Micky bet a shilling on six rats surviving, for which he got odds of five to one. Hugh declined to bet.

The pit was about four foot deep, surrounded by a wooden fence another four foot high. Crude candelabra set at intervals round the fence threw light into the hole. The dog was unmuzzled and let into the pit through a wooden gate. He stood stiff-legged, hackles raised, waiting for the rats. The rat handlers picked up the cage. There was a quiet moment of anticipation.

Suddenly Tonio said, 'Ten guineas on the dog.'

Micky was surprised. Tonio had talked as if he had to be careful how he spent money. Was he making bets he could not afford?

The bookmaker scribbled a slip, handed it over, and pocketed Tonio's money.

The handlers swung the cage back, then forward, as if they were going to throw the whole thing into the pit; then a hinged flap at one end opened, and the rats were hurled through the air. April screamed with shock and Micky laughed.

The dog went to work with lethal concentration. As the rats rained down on him his jaws snapped rhythmically. He would pick one up, break its back with one hard shake of his huge head, and drop it for another. All the dogs in the room barked madly, and the spectators added to the noise, the women shrieking to see the carnage and the men shouting encouragement to the dog or to the rats. Micky laughed and laughed.

It took a moment for the rats to discover they were trapped in the pit. Some ran round the edge, looking for a way out; others jumped up, trying without success to get a grip on the sheer sides. For a few seconds the dog had it all his own way, and killed a dozen or more. Then the rats turned, all at once, as if they had heard a signal. They began to fly at the dog, biting his legs and his short tail. Some got on his back and bit his neck and ears.

The dog kept turning around in dizzying circles and caught rat after rat, killing them all; but there were always more behind him. Half the rats were dead when he began to tire. Now, Micky thought, it starts to get interesting.

Sensing the dog's fatigue, the rats became bolder. When he had one in his jaws, another would spring for his throat. One particularly big creature dug its teeth into his hind leg and refused to let go. The leg seemed to give way—the rat must have severed a tendon, Micky thought—and suddenly the dog was limping.

He was much slower to turn now. As if they knew that, the dozen or so remaining rats all attacked his rear end. He could not hold out much longer. Micky thought he might have bet wisely, and there would be six rats left when the dog died.

Then the dog gained a sudden increase of energy. Spinning round on three legs he killed another four rats in as many seconds. But it was his last gasp. His legs buckled under him, and his head drooped.

Micky counted: there were six rats left.

He looked at his companions. Hugh looked ill. Edward said to him, 'A bit strong for your stomach, eh?'

'The dog and the rats are simply behaving as nature intended,' Hugh said. 'It's the humans who disgust me.'

Edward grunted and went to buy more drinks.

April's eyes were sparkling as she looked up at Tonio, a man—she thought—who could afford to lose ten guineas in a bet. Micky looked

more closely at Tonio and saw in his face a hint of panic. I don't believe he *can* afford to lose ten guineas, Micky thought.

Micky collected his winnings from the bookmaker: five shillings. He had made a profit on the evening already. But he had a feeling that what he had learned about Tonio could in the end be worth a great deal more.

IT WAS MICKY who had most disgusted Hugh. Throughout the contest, Micky had been laughing hysterically. At first Hugh could not think why it sounded so chillingly familiar. Then he remembered Micky laughing just the same way when Edward threw Peter Middleton's clothes into the swimming-hole.

Edward came back with the drinks and said, 'Let's go to Nellie's.'

They swallowed their tots of brandy and went out. Tonio and April took their leave and slipped into a cheap hotel. Hugh wondered whether to go on with Edward and Micky. He was not having a very good time, yet he was curious to know what went on at Nellie's. He probably ought to see the evening out, he thought in the end.

Nellie's was in Prince's Street, off Leicester Square. As the three young men arrived, two uniformed commissionaires were turning away a middle-aged man. 'Evening dress only,' said one of the commissionaires over the man's protests.

They seemed to know Edward and Micky, for one touched his hat and the other opened the door. They went down a long passage, then another door opened.

It was a bit like walking into a large drawing room in a big London house. Fires blazed in two large grates, there were sofas and chairs, and the room was full of men and women in evening dress.

However, this was no ordinary drawing room. Most of the men had their hats on. Some had their coats off and their ties undone. Most of the women were fully dressed but a few seemed to be in their underwear. Some were sitting in men's laps, and others were kissing men. For the first time in his life, Hugh was in a brothel.

It was noisy, with men shouting jokes, women laughing, and a fiddler somewhere playing a waltz. Hugh followed Micky and Edward as they walked the length of the room. The walls were hung with pictures of naked women. At the far end sat the fattest person Hugh had ever seen: a vast-bosomed, heavily painted woman in a silk gown like a purple tent. She was sitting on a chair like a throne, surrounded by girls.

Edward and Micky approached the throne and bowed, and Hugh followed suit.

Edward said, 'Nell, my pet, allow me to present my cousin, Mr Hugh Pilaster.'

'Welcome, boys,' said Nell. 'Come and entertain these beautiful girls.'

'In a while, Nell. Is there a game tonight?'

'There's always a game at Nellie's,' she said, and waved towards a door at one side of the room.

Edward bowed again and they went into the next room, where twelve or fifteen men were sitting round two baccarat tables. Most of them had drinks beside them, and the air was full of cigar smoke. There were a few empty chairs at one of the tables, and Edward and Micky immediately sat down. Hugh said quietly to Edward, 'What are the stakes?'

'A pound minimum.'

Hugh remembered Tonio losing ten guineas at the ratting. 'Then I shan't play,' he said.

Micky said languidly, 'We never imagined you would.'

Hugh felt awkward. The banker dealt cards and Hugh decided to slip away. He returned to the main drawing room. A drunk man was on his knees, singing to a whore, while two of his friends laughed uproariously. On the next couch a couple were kissing. Hugh headed for the exit. A moment later he was out in the street. The night had cooled a little, and he took a deep breath.

'Decided to have an early night, sir?' asked the commissionaire.

'What a good idea,' said Hugh, and he walked away.

## JULY

As a little boy, Hugh had thought Pilasters Bank was owned by the walkers. These personages were in fact lowly messengers, but they were all rather portly, and wore immaculate morning dress with silver watch-chains across their ample waistcoats, and they moved about the bank with such ponderous dignity that to a child they appeared the most important people there.

Hugh had been brought here at the age of ten by his grandfather, old Seth's brother. The marble-walled banking hall on the ground floor had seemed like a church: huge, silent and mysterious. The mystery had gone out of it now. He knew that the massive leather-bound ledgers were not arcane texts but simple lists of financial

transactions. A bill of exchange was no longer a magic spell but merely a promise to pay money at a future date, written on a piece of paper and guaranteed by a bank. Discounting, which as a child he had thought must mean counting backwards, turned out to be the practice of buying bills of exchange at a little less than their face value, keeping them until their due date, then cashing them at a small profit.

Hugh was an assistant to Jonas Mulberry, the principal clerk. A bald man of about forty, Mulberry was good-hearted but a little sour. He would always take time to explain things to Hugh, but he was quick to find fault if Hugh was in the least careless. This morning he had asked Hugh to count the applications for the Russian Loan issue. The bank was raising a loan of two million pounds for the government of Russia. It had issued one-hundred-pound bonds which paid five pounds interest per year; but they were selling the bonds for ninety-three pounds, so the true interest rate was over five and three-eighths. Most of the bonds had been bought by other banks, but some had been offered to the public, and now the applications had to be counted.

The work took most of the day. It was a few minutes before four o'clock when Hugh added the last column of figures. A little more than one hundred thousand pounds' worth of bonds remained unsold. It was not a big shortfall, as a proportion of a two-million-pound issue, but the bank would have to buy the surplus at ninety-three pounds. On the open market the price might go down, and the bank would have made a loss. There was a big psychological difference between oversubscribed and undersubscribed, and the partners would be disappointed.

He wrote the tally on a clean sheet of paper and went in search of Mulberry. The banking hall was quiet now. A few customers stood at the long polished counter. Pilasters was a merchant bank, lending money to traders to finance their ventures. But all the family kept accounts at the bank, and the facility was extended to a small number of very rich clients. Hugh spotted one of them now: Sir John Cammel. A thin man with a bald head, Sir John earned vast incomes from coal mines and docks on his lands in Yorkshire. Now he was pacing the marble floor looking impatient and bad-tempered. Hugh said, 'Good afternoon, Sir John, I hope you're being attended to?'

'No, I'm not, lad. Doesn't anyone do any work in this place?'

Hugh glanced around. None of the partners was in sight. He decided to use his initiative. 'Will you come upstairs to the partners' room, sir? I know they will be keen to see you.'



Hugh led him upstairs. The partners all worked in the same room—to keep an eye on one another, according to tradition. The room was furnished with leather sofas and bookcases. In framed portraits on the walls, ancestral Pilasters looked down their beaklike noses at their descendants.

The room was empty. 'One of them will be back in a moment, I'm sure,' Hugh said. 'May I offer you a glass of Madeira?' He went to the sideboard and poured a generous measure, while Sir John settled himself in a leather armchair. 'I'm Hugh Pilaster, by the way.'

'Oh, yes?' Sir John was somewhat mollified to find he was talking to a Pilaster, rather than an ordinary office boy. 'Did you go to Windfield?'

'Yes, sir. I was there with your son Albert. We called him Hump.'

'All Cammels are called Hump.'

'I haven't seen him since . . . since then.'

'He went to the Cape Colony. He raises horses there.'

Albert Cammel had been at the swimming-hole on that fateful day in 1866. Hugh was curious to learn his version of how Peter Middleton drowned. 'I'd like to write to him,' he said.

'I dare say he'll be glad of a letter from an old schoolfriend. I'll give you his address.' Sir John moved to the table, dipped a quill in the inkwell and scribbled on a sheet of paper. 'There you are.'

'Thank you. Is there anything else I can do for you while you're waiting?'

'Well, perhaps you can deal with this.' He took a cheque out of his pocket. Hugh examined it. It was for a hundred and ten thousand pounds. 'I've just sold a coal mine,' Sir John explained.

'I can certainly deposit it for you.'

'What interest will I get?'

'Four per cent, at present.'

'That'll do, I suppose.'

Hugh hesitated. If Sir John could be persuaded to buy Russian bonds, the loan issue could be transformed from being slightly undersubscribed to slightly oversubscribed. Should he mention it? He had already overstepped his authority by bringing a guest into the partners' room. He decided to take a chance. 'You could get five and three-eighths by buying Russian bonds.'

Sir John narrowed his eyes. 'Are they safe?'

'As safe as the Russian government.'

'I'll think about it.'

Hugh's enthusiasm had been aroused now and he wanted to close the sale. 'The rate may not be the same tomorrow, as you know.

When the bonds come on the open market the price may go up or down.' Then he decided he was sounding too eager, so he backed off. 'I'll place this cheque to your account immediately, and if you wish you could talk to one of my uncles about the bonds.'

'All right, young Pilaster—off you go.'

Hugh went out and met Samuel Pilaster in the hall. He looked dapper in a silver-grey frock coat and a navy-blue satin tie. 'Sir John Cammel is in there, Uncle,' Hugh said. 'I found him in the banking hall looking bad-tempered, so I've given him a glass of Madeira—I hope I did the right thing.'

'I'm sure you did,' said Samuel. 'I'll take care of him.'

'He brought in this cheque for a hundred and ten thousand. I mentioned the Russian Loan—it's undersubscribed by a hundred thousand.'

Samuel raised his eyebrows. 'That was precocious of you.'

'I only said he might talk to one of the partners about it.'

'All right. It's not a bad idea.'

Hugh returned to the banking hall, pulled out Sir John's ledger and entered the deposit, then took the cheque to the clearing clerk. Then he went up to Mulberry's office. He handed over the tally of Russian bonds, and mentioned that Sir John Cammel might buy the balance. A walker came in with tea and bread and butter on a tray. This was served to all clerks who stayed at the office after four thirty.

A little later Samuel came in and handed some papers to Mulberry. 'Sir John bought the bonds,' he said to Hugh. 'Good work.'

When he had gone, Mulberry said to Hugh, 'Did you advise Sir John Cammel to buy the surplus Russian bonds?'

'I just mentioned it,' said Hugh.

'Well, well,' said Mulberry. 'Well, well.' And he sat staring at Hugh speculatively for several minutes thereafter.

IT WAS A SUNNY Sunday afternoon, and all London was out for a stroll in their best Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. Maisie Robinson and April Tilsley were strolling down the wide avenue of Piccadilly, trying to pick up men.

They lived in Soho, sharing a room in a slum house in Carnaby Street, near the St James's Workhouse. They would get up around midday, dress carefully, and go out on the streets. By evening they had generally found a couple of men to pay for their dinner; if not, they went hungry. They had almost no money but they needed little. Maisie always wore the same clothes and washed her underwear every night. Sooner or later, she hoped, one of the men who bought her

dinner would want to marry her or set her up as his mistress.

She brooded on that prospect as they came to the western end of Piccadilly and turned north into Mayfair. She was determined not to live like her parents, waiting all week for a pittance on payday and forever at risk of unemployment because of some financial crisis hundreds of miles away. But the thought of selling her body or trapping some man into a loveless marriage sickened her.

Cutting through a mews, they passed a livery stable. Maisie felt nostalgic for the circus, and stopped to pet a tall chestnut stallion. The horse nuzzled her hand. A man's voice said, 'Redboy don't generally allow strangers to touch him.'

Maisie turned to see a middle-aged man in a yellow waistcoat. She smiled. 'He doesn't mind me, do you, Redboy?'

'I don't suppose you could ride him, now, could you?'

'Ride him? Yes, I could ride him, without a saddle, and stand upright on his back, too. Is he yours?'

The man bowed and said, 'George Sammls, at your service, ladies; proprietor, as it says there.' He pointed to his name over the door.

Maisie said, 'I shouldn't boast, Mr Sammls, but I've spent the last four years in a circus, so I can probably ride anything you have in your stables.'

'Is that a fact?' he said thoughtfully. 'Well, well.'

April put in, 'What's on your mind, Mr Sammls?'

He hesitated. 'This may seem a mite sudden, but I was asking myself whether this lady might be interested in a business proposition. You see, Redboy's for sale, but you don't sell horses by keeping them indoors. Whereas, if you was to ride him around the park for an hour or so, looking, if I may be so bold, as pretty as a pitcher, you'd attract attention. Sooner or later someone would ask you how much you wanted for the horse.'

Was there money in this? Maisie wondered. 'And then I'd tell the person, "Away and see Mr Sammls in the Curzon Mews, for the nag's his." Is that what you mean?'

'Exackly so, except rather than call Redboy a nag, you might term him "this fine specimen of horseflesh", or such.'

'Maybe,' said Maisie, thinking to herself that she would use her own words, not Sammls's. 'How much would you pay?'

'What do you think it's worth?'

Maisie picked a ridiculous sum. 'A pound a day.'

'Too much,' he said promptly. 'I'll give you half that.'

She could hardly believe her luck. Ten shillings a day was an enormous wage: girls of her age who worked as housemaids were

lucky to get a shilling a day. Her heart beat faster. 'Done,' she said quickly. 'When do I start?'

'Come tomorrow at half past ten.'

They shook hands and the girls moved off. Sammles called after her, 'Mind you wear the dress you've got on today—it's fetching.'

'Have no fear,' Maisie said. It was the only one she had. But she did not tell Sammles that.

TO THE EDITOR OF *The Times*:

Sir,

There has been noted in Hyde Park, at about half past eleven o'clock each morning, a jam of carriages so large that there has been no getting forward for up to an hour. The fault lies with a lady, whose name is unknown, but whom men term 'The Lioness', doubtless on account of the tawny colour of her hair; a charming creature who rides horses that would daunt many males. The fame of her beauty and equestrian daring is such that all London migrates to the Park at the hour when she is expected; and, once there, finds it cannot move. Could not you, Sir, whose business it is to know everything and everyone, and who possibly, therefore, may know the true identity of The Lioness, prevail upon her to desist, so that the Park may return to its normal state of quiet decorum?

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

AN OBSERVER.

THE LETTER HAD TO BE a joke, Hugh thought as he put down the newspaper. The Lioness was real enough—he had heard the bank clerks talking about her—but she was not the cause of carriage congestion. He gazed through the leaded windows of his aunt's house to the park. Today was a holiday and the sun was shining. Hugh thought he might go to the park to see what the fuss was about.

Aunt Augusta was also planning to go to the park. She went at this time most mornings, as did all upper-class women and idle men. It was a place to see and be seen. The real cause of congestion was people stopping their carriages to gossip.

Hugh heard his aunt's voice and went into the hall. As usual, she was beautifully dressed. Today she wore a purple day gown with a tight jacket bodice and yards of ruffles below. She was talking to Uncle Joseph, who stood in front of her, stroking his bushy side-whiskers impatiently. Hugh wondered whether there was any affection between them. There must have been at one time, he supposed,



for they had conceived Edward and his sister, Clementine. Augusta carried on speaking as if Hugh were not there. 'The whole family is worried,' she was saying insistently. 'There could be a scandal.'

'But the situation—whatever it may be—has been going on for years, and no one has ever thought it scandalous.'

'Because Samuel is not the senior partner. An ordinary person can do many things without attracting notice. But the senior partner of Pilasters Bank is a public figure. You must make Samuel understand that unless he gives way Seth may have to be told.'

Hugh could not help admiring her ruthlessness. She was sending Samuel a message: Give up your secretary or we'll force your father to confront the reality that his son is more or less married to a man. She wanted to make it impossible for him to become senior partner—so that the mantle would fall on her husband. It was pretty low, and Hugh wondered whether Joseph fully understood what Augusta was doing.

Now Joseph said uneasily, 'I should like to resolve matters without such drastic action.'

Augusta lowered her voice to an intimate murmur. When she did this, Hugh always thought, she was transparently insincere, like a dragon trying to purr. 'I'm sure you'll find a way to do just that,' she said. She smiled beseechingly. 'Will you drive with me today? I should so like your company.'

He shook his head. 'I must go to the bank.'

'But it's a holiday!'

'Holiday or not, I have work to do.' He turned to Hugh. 'Drive in the park with your aunt, she needs an escort.' With that he put on his hat and went out.

Hugh did not really want to drive with Augusta, but he was curious to see *The Lioness*, so he did not argue.

Augusta's daughter Clementine appeared, dressed to go out. Twenty years old, she looked like her mother, but where Augusta was overbearing, Clementine was shy.

The carriage was new, painted bright blue and drawn by a superb pair of grey geldings. Augusta and Clementine sat facing forward, and Hugh settled himself opposite them. The top was down because of the brilliant sunshine, but the ladies opened their parasols. The coachman flicked his whip and they set off.

A few moments later they were on South Carriage Drive. It was as crowded as the writer of the letter to *The Times* had claimed. There were hundreds of horses ridden by top-hatted men and sidesaddle women; dozens of carriages of every type; plus children on ponies,

couples on foot, nurses with baby carriages and people with dogs. The men wore full morning dress and the women sported all the bright colours the new chemical dyes could produce.

'There's Lady St Ann in a Dolly Varden hat!' Clementine exclaimed.

'They went out of fashion a year ago,' said Augusta.

'Well, well,' said Hugh.

A carriage pulled alongside, and Hugh saw his aunt, Madeleine Hartshorn. If she had whiskers she'd look just like her brother Joseph, he thought. Both carriages stopped, and the ladies exchanged greetings. Augusta said, 'Take a turn with us, Madeleine, I want to talk to you.'

Madeleine's footman helped her down from her own carriage and into Augusta's and they drove off again.

'They're going to tell Seth about Samuel's secretary,' Augusta said.

'Oh, no!' said Madeleine. 'They mustn't!'

'I've spoken to Joseph, but they won't be stopped,' Augusta went on. Her sincere tone took Hugh's breath away.

'I shall speak to George,' said Madeleine. 'The shock could kill dear Uncle Seth.'

Hugh toyed with the idea of reporting this conversation to his uncle Joseph. Surely, he thought, Joseph would be appalled to know how he and the other partners were being manipulated by their wives. But they would not believe Hugh. He was a nobody—which was why Augusta did not care what she said in front of him.

Their carriage slowed almost to a halt. There was a knot of horses and vehicles up ahead. Augusta said irritably, 'What's the cause of this?'

'It must be The Lioness,' Clementine said excitedly.

As Augusta's carriage drew nearer, a smart little victoria emerged from the ruck, pulled by a pair of high-stepping ponies and driven by a woman.

'It *is* The Lioness!' Clementine squealed.

Hugh looked at the woman driving the victoria and was astonished to recognise Maisie Robinson. She was wearing a brown merino costume with a mushroom-coloured bow at her throat. On her head was a perky little top hat with a curly brim. Hugh felt angry with her all over again for what she had said about his father. All the same there was something irresistibly charming about the set of that small, neat body in the driving seat. So The Lioness was Maisie Robinson!

While Hugh was still marvelling, there was an accident. A nervous thoroughbred trotted past Augusta's carriage and was startled by a



small, noisy terrier. It reared up and the rider fell off into the road—right in front of Maisie's victoria. Quickly she changed direction, showing impressive control of her vehicle. Her evasive action took her right in front of Augusta's horses, causing the coachman to haul on his reins and let out an oath.

Everyone looked at the thrown rider. He appeared unhurt. He got to his feet unaided, dusted himself down, and walked off, cursing, to catch his horse.

Maisie recognised Hugh. 'Hugh Pilaster, I do declare!' she cried.



Hugh blushed. 'Good morning,' he said, and realised immediately that he had made a serious error of etiquette. He ought not to have acknowledged Maisie while he was with his aunts, for he could not possibly introduce such a person to them.

However, Maisie made no attempt to address the ladies. 'How do you like these ponies?' she said.

Hugh was completely thrown by this beautiful, surprising woman. 'They're very fine,' he said, without looking at them.

'They're for sale.'



Aunt Augusta said icily, 'Hugh, kindly tell this *person* to let us pass!'

Maisie looked at Augusta for the first time. 'Shut your gob, you old bitch,' she said casually.

Clementine gasped and Aunt Madeleine gave a small scream of horror. Hugh's mouth dropped open. Maisie's gorgeous clothes and expensive equipage had made it easy to forget that she was an urchin from the slums. Her words were so splendidly vulgar that for a moment Augusta was too stunned to reply and Maisie gave her no time to recover. Turning back to Hugh, she said, 'Tell your cousin Edward he should buy my ponies!' Then she cracked her whip and drove away.

Augusta erupted. 'How dare you expose me to such a person!' she boiled. 'How dare you take off your hat to her!'

Hugh was staring after Maisie, watching her neat back and jaunty hat recede along the drive.

*Cape Colony, South Africa*  
*July 14, 1873*

*Dear Hugh,*

*Jolly nice to hear from you! One is rather isolated out here, and you can't imagine the pleasure we get out of a long, newsy letter from home. Mrs Cammel, who used to be the Hon. Amelia Clapham until she married me, was especially amused by your account of The Lioness . . .*

*I'm glad you asked me about Peter. I have felt guilty ever since that day. Your cousin Edward was, as you so colourfully put it, more rotten than a dead cat. You managed to get most of your clothes out of the water and scarper, but Peter and Tonio weren't so quick. I was on the other side, and I don't think Edward and Micky noticed me. At any rate they never spoke to me about the incident.*

*Anyway, after you had gone Edward proceeded to torment Peter, pushing his head under the water and splashing his face. I could see it was getting out of hand but I was a complete coward. I should have gone to Peter's aid but I was no match for Edward and Micky Miranda, and I didn't want my clothes soaked as well. I grabbed my clothes and sneaked away. I looked back once. Tonio was scrambling up the side, clutching a bundle of wet clothes, and Edward was swimming across the pool after him, leaving Peter spluttering in the middle.*

*I thought Peter would be all right, but he must have been at*

*the end of his tether. As the ghastly story emerged I never had the guts to admit that I had seen what happened. Not a tale to be proud of, Hugh. But telling the truth at last has made me feel a bit better . . .*

HUGH PUT DOWN Albert Cammel's letter and stared out of his bedroom window. The letter explained both more and less than Cammel imagined.

It explained how Micky Miranda had insinuated himself into the Pilaster family. No doubt Micky had told Augusta that Edward had virtually killed Peter. But in court Micky said Edward had tried to rescue the drowning boy. In telling that lie Micky had saved the Pilasters from public disgrace. Augusta would have been powerfully grateful—and perhaps, also, fearful that Micky might one day turn against them and reveal the truth. It gave Hugh a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. Albert Cammel, all unknowing, had revealed that Augusta's relationship with Micky was deep, dark and corrupt.

But another puzzle remained. For Hugh knew something about Peter Middleton that almost no one else was aware of. Peter had been something of a weakling, and all the boys treated him as a weed. Embarrassed, he had embarked on a training programme—and his main exercise was swimming. He stroked across that pool hour after hour, trying to build his physique. As a result, he was like a fish in the water. It would have taken more than Edward Pilaster to drown him.

Albert Cammel had told the truth, as far as he knew it, Hugh was sure. But something else had happened on that hot afternoon in Bishop's Wood. Edward's casual horseplay could not have killed Peter. And if his death was not accidental, it was deliberate.

And that was murder.

Hugh shuddered. There had been only three people there: Edward, Micky and Peter. Peter must have been murdered by Edward or Micky. Or both.

AUGUSTA WAS ALREADY dissatisfied with her Japanese decor. The drawing room was full of oriental screens and Japanese fans and vases in black lacquered cabinets. It was all very expensive, but cheap copies were appearing in the Oxford Street stores, and the look was no longer exclusive to the very best houses. Unfortunately, Joseph would not permit redecoration so soon, and Augusta would have to live with increasingly common furniture for several years.

The drawing room was where Augusta held court at teatime every weekday. The women usually came first: her daughter Clementine,

and her sisters-in-law Madeleine and Beatrice. Beatrice was married to Joseph's brother William, always called Young William because he was born twenty-three years after Joseph. The partners would arrive from the bank at about five: Joseph, old Seth, Madeleine's husband George Hartshorn, and occasionally Samuel. If business was quiet the boys would come too: Edward, Hugh and Young William. The only non-member of the family who was a regular teatime guest was Micky Miranda. It was at these gatherings that Augusta found out what was going on in the family and at the bank.

A few minutes before four o'clock, as she was standing in the drawing room feeling discontented with her furniture, Samuel walked in. All the Pilasters were ugly, but Samuel was the worst, she thought. He had the big nose, but he also had a weak, womanish mouth. He was a fussy man, immaculately dressed, fastidious about his food, a lover of cats. But what made Augusta dislike him was that of all the men in the family he was the most difficult to persuade. Nothing worked on him—least of all her feminine charms. He had an infuriating way of laughing at her when she thought she was being clever.

Today, however, Samuel did not wear that amused, sceptical smile. He looked angry, so angry that for a moment Augusta was alarmed. He had obviously come early in order to find her alone. It struck her that for two months she had been conspiring to ruin him and that people had been murdered for less than that. He did not shake her hand, but stood in front of her, wearing a pearl-grey morning coat and a deep wine-red tie, smelling faintly of cologne. Augusta held up her hands in a defensive gesture.

Samuel gave a humourless laugh. 'I'm not going to strike you, Augusta,' he said. 'Though heaven knows you deserve it.'

Of course he would not touch her. Her confidence came back in a rush, and she said disdainfully, 'How dare you criticise me!'

'Criticise?' he said. 'I don't stoop to criticise you.' He paused, then spoke again in a voice of controlled anger. 'I despise you.'

Augusta could not be intimidated a second time. 'Have you come here to tell me that you are willing to give up your vicious ways?'

'My vicious ways,' he repeated. 'You're willing to destroy my father's happiness and make my own life miserable, all for the sake of your ambition, and yet you can talk about *my* vicious ways! I believe you're so steeped in evil that you've forgotten what it is.'

'I'm only concerned for the bank,' she said coldly.

'Is that your excuse?' He went to the window and looked out at the garden. 'It's not for myself that I'm worried,' he went on. 'I'd like to

be senior partner, but I can live without it. I'd be a good one—not as dynamic as my father, perhaps; more of a teamworker. But Joseph isn't up to the job. He's impulsive, and he makes poor decisions; and you make it worse, by inflaming his ambition and clouding his judgment. He'll harm the bank. Don't you care about that?

For a moment Augusta wondered if he was right. But it was ridiculous to say that Joseph would be bad for the bank. There was nothing very difficult about what the partners did: they read the financial pages of the newspapers, loaned people money and collected the interest. Joseph could do that as well as any of them. 'You men always pretend that banking is complex and mysterious,' she said. 'But you don't fool me.'

'Would you really go to my father, as you have threatened?' Samuel said. 'You know it could kill him.'

She hesitated only for an instant. 'There is no alternative.'

He stared at her for a long time, then spoke with obvious distaste. 'Very well. I shall tell the others that I don't wish to be senior partner when my father retires.'

Augusta repressed a smile of triumph. She had won.

'Enjoy your victory,' Samuel said bitterly. 'But remember, Augusta, we all have secrets. One day someone will use yours against you, and you'll remember this.'

'I have no secrets to be ashamed of,' Augusta said.

'Don't you?' He gave her a peculiar look. 'A lawyer called David Middleton came to see me yesterday.'

'Should I know him?' The name was disturbingly familiar.

'You met him once, seven years ago, at an inquest.'

Suddenly Augusta felt cold. Middleton: the boy who drowned.

Samuel said, 'David Middleton believes that his brother Peter was killed—by Edward.'

Augusta wanted desperately to sit down, but she refused to let Samuel see her rattled. 'Why on earth is he trying to make trouble now, after seven years?'

'He told me he remained silent for fear of causing his parents more distress. However, his mother died soon after Peter, and his father died this year.'

'Why did he approach you—not me?'

'He belongs to my club. He says several eyewitnesses were never called to give evidence. He's a quarrelsome individual, like all lawyers. He's not going to let this rest.' Samuel went to the door. 'I won't stay for tea. Good afternoon, Augusta.'

Augusta sat down heavily on a sofa. She was dreadfully frightened



for Edward. She could not bear anything bad to happen to him. She held her head to stop it throbbing.

Hastead, her butler, came in, followed by two parlour maids with trays of tea and cakes. 'With your permission, madam?' he said in his Welsh accent. She nodded. 'Thank you, madam,' he said, and they began to set out the china. Augusta could sometimes be soothed by Hastead's obsequious manner, but today it did not work. She got up and went to the open French doors. The sunny garden did nothing for her either. How was she going to stop David Middleton?

She was still agonising over the problem when Micky Miranda arrived. He saw that she was distressed and he was instantly sympathetic. He came across the room with the grace and speed of a jungle cat, and his voice was like a caress. 'Mrs Pilaster, what on earth has upset you?'

She grabbed him by the arms. 'Something frightful has happened.'

His hands rested on her waist, and she felt a shiver of pleasure as his fingertips pressed her hips. 'Tell me about it,' he said soothingly.

She began to feel calmer. At moments like these she was very fond of Micky. He reminded her of how she had felt about the young Earl of Strang, when she was a girl: his graceful manners, and most of all the way he moved, the suppleness of his limbs and the oiled machinery of his body . . .

She saw the maids staring at her, and realised that it was mildly indecent for Micky to stand there with both hands on her hips. She detached herself from him, took his arm and led him through the French windows into the garden. They sat on a bench in the shade. Augusta spoke quietly, and Micky leaned close to hear her, so close she could have kissed him almost without moving. 'Samuel came to tell me he will not seek the position of senior partner.'

'Good news!'

'Yes. It means that the post will certainly go to my husband.'

'And Papa can have his rifles.'

'As soon as Seth retires.'

'It's maddening the way old Seth hangs on!' Micky exclaimed. He looked into her eyes. 'But that's not what has upset you.'

'No. It's that boy who drowned at your school—Peter Middleton. Samuel told me that his brother, a lawyer, is asking questions.'

Micky's fine face darkened. 'After all these years?'

'Apparently he kept quiet for his parents' sake, but now they're dead.' Augusta hesitated. She screwed up her nerve. 'Micky . . . was it Edward's fault the boy died?'

'Well . . .'

'Say yes or no!' she commanded.

Micky paused, then at last said, 'Yes.'

Augusta closed her eyes.

Micky said quietly, 'Peter was a poor swimmer. Edward didn't drown him, but he did exhaust him. Peter was alive when Edward left him to chase after Tonio. But I believe he was too weak to swim to the side, and he drowned.'

'Teddy didn't want to kill him.'

'Of course not.'

'So it's not murder.'

'I'm afraid it is,' Micky said gravely, and Augusta's heart missed a beat. 'If a thief throws a man to the ground, intending only to rob him, but the man suffers a heart attack and dies, the thief is guilty of murder, even though he did not intend to kill.'

'How do you know this?'

'I checked with a lawyer, years ago.'

'Why?'

'I wanted to know Edward's position.'

Augusta buried her face in her hands. It was worse than she had imagined. Micky prised her hands away from her face and tenderly kissed each one in turn. He continued to hold her hands as he said, 'No sensible person would persecute Edward over something that happened when he was a child.'

'But is David Middleton a sensible person?' Augusta cried.

'Perhaps not. He appears to have nursed his obsession through the years. God forbid that his persistence should lead him to the truth.'

Augusta shuddered as she imagined the consequences. There would be a scandal; the police would be brought in; poor dear Teddy might have to go on trial; and if he should be found guilty—

Augusta squeezed Micky's hands, then released them and took stock. She had seen the shadow of the gallows fall on her only son. It was time to take action. Thank God Edward had a true friend in Micky. 'We must make sure Middleton's enquiries lead nowhere. How many people know the truth?'

'Six,' Micky said immediately. 'Edward, you and me make three, but we aren't going to tell him anything. Then there is Hugh.'

'He wasn't there when the boy died.'

'No, but he saw enough to know our story to the coroner was false.'

'Hugh is a problem, then. The others?'

'Tonio Silva saw it all.'

'He never said anything at the time.'

'He was too frightened of me then. But I'm not sure he is now.'

'And the sixth?'

'We never found out who that was.'

Augusta felt a fresh tremor of fear. But there was nothing they could do about the unknown witness now. 'Two people we can deal with, then: Hugh and Tonio.'

There was a thoughtful silence. Then Micky said, 'Tonio has a weakness.'

'Ah, yes?'

'He's a bad gambler. Bets more than he can afford, and loses.'

The thought crossed Augusta's mind that Micky might know how to cheat at cards. 'Perhaps you could arrange a game?'

Micky said, 'It might be expensive. Would you stake me?'

'How much would you need?'

'A hundred pounds, I fear.'

Augusta did not hesitate: Teddy's life was at stake. 'Very well,' she said. She heard voices in the house: other guests were arriving. She stood up. 'I'm not sure how to deal with Hugh,' she went on worriedly. 'I'll have to think about it.' She gave Micky's hand a conspiratorial squeeze and went inside.

## AUGUST

London was hot and sticky, and the population longed for fresh air and open fields. On the first day of August everyone went to the races at Goodwood. They travelled by trains from Victoria Station in south London. The divisions of British society were mirrored in the transport arrangements—high society in the upholstered luxury of the first-class coaches, shopkeepers and schoolteachers crowded but comfortable in second class, factory workers and domestic servants crammed together on hard wooden benches in third. The picnics of the rich had been sent by earlier trains: scores of hampers, carried on the shoulders of strapping young footmen, packed with china and linen, cooked chickens, champagne and hothouse peaches. For the less wealthy there were stalls selling sausages, shellfish and beer. The poor brought bread and cheese.

Maisie Robinson and April Tilsley went with Solly Greenbourne and Tonio Silva. Their position in the social hierarchy was dubious. Solly and Tonio clearly belonged in first class, but Maisie and April should have gone third. Solly compromised by buying second-class

tickets. However, he was too fond of his food to settle for a lunch bought off a stall, and he had sent four servants ahead with a vast picnic of cold salmon and white wine packed in ice. They spread a snow-white tablecloth on the ground and sat round it on the springy turf. Maisie fed Solly titbits. She was growing more and more fond of him. He was kind to everyone and full of fun. Gluttony was his only real vice. It was crazy to be walking out with one of the richest men in the world and living in one room in Soho. By now she ought to be his mistress, wearing diamonds and furs. But she would not let Solly give her anything but flowers. It drove April mad.

The racing began after lunch. A bookmaker, in a loud check suit with a huge spray of flowers in the buttonhole, stood on a box nearby and shouted odds. Tonio and Solly bet on every race. Maisie got bored: one horse race was the same as another if you didn't gamble. April would not leave Tonio's side, but Maisie decided to look around.

The horses were not the only attraction. The Downs around the racecourse were crowded with tents, stalls and carts. There were gambling booths, freak shows, and gypsies telling fortunes. People were selling gin, cider, meat pies and Bibles. Barrel organs and bands competed with one another, and through the crowds wandered jugglers and acrobats asking for pennies. The boisterous carnival atmosphere reminded Maisie of the circus, and she suffered a nostalgic twinge of regret for the life she had left behind.

She passed a puppet show as it was reaching its climax, with the irascible Mr Punch being knocked from one side of the little stage to the other by his club-wielding wife. She studied the crowd with a knowledgeable eye. There was not much money in a Punch and Judy show: most of the audience would slip away without paying anything. But there were other ways to fleece the customers. She spotted a boy at the back robbing a man in a top hat. Everyone but Maisie was watching the show, and no one else saw the small grubby hand sliding into the man's waistcoat pocket. Maisie had no intention of doing anything about it, but when she looked more closely at the victim she recognised the black hair and blue eyes of Hugh Pilaster. She recalled April telling her that Hugh had no money. He could not afford to lose his watch. She decided to save him from his own carelessness.

She made her way quickly round to the back of the crowd. The pickpocket was a ragged sandy-haired boy of about eleven years. He was delicately drawing Hugh's watch-chain out of his waistcoat. Maisie grabbed him by the wrist as he edged away. He gave a small cry and tried to wriggle free, but she was too strong for him. 'Give it to me and I'll say nothing,' she hissed.



He hesitated for a moment. Maisie saw fear and greed at war on his dirty face. Then a kind of weary resignation took over, and he dropped the watch on the ground. She released his hand and he was gone in a twinkling.

She picked up the watch. On the back was inscribed: *Tobias Pilaster, from your loving wife, Lydia, 23rd May 1851*. Maisie was glad she had rescued it. She closed the face and tapped Hugh on the shoulder. He turned round and his bright blue eyes widened in surprise. 'Miss Robinson!'

'What's the time?' she said.

He reached for his watch and found his pocket empty. 'That's funny . . .' He looked around as if he might have dropped it. 'I hope I haven't—'

She held it up.

'By Jove!' he said. 'How on earth did you find it?'

'I saw you being robbed, and rescued it.'

'Where's the thief?'

'I let him go. He was only a wee lad. I'd have let him take the watch, only I know you can't afford to buy another.'

'You don't really mean that.'

'I do. I used to steal when I was a child.'

'How dreadful.'

Maisie found herself annoyed by his sanctimonious attitude. She said, 'Your father died owing my father money. Was that honest?'

'I was thirteen years old when my father went bankrupt,' he said with sudden anger. 'Does that mean I have to turn a blind eye to villainy all my life?'

Maisie was taken aback. It was not often that men snapped at her, and this was the second time Hugh had done it. But she did not want to quarrel with him again. She touched his arm. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to criticise your father. I just wanted you to understand why a child might steal.'

He softened immediately. 'And I haven't thanked you for saving my watch. It was my mother's wedding gift to my father, so it's more precious than its price. Would you like a glass of beer? It's so hot.'

It was just what she felt like. 'Yes, please.'

A few yards off there was a heavy four-wheeled cart loaded with huge barrels. Hugh bought two pottery tankards of warm, malty ale. Maisie took a long draught. It tasted better than Solly's French wine.

'Are you here on your own?' Hugh asked.

'No, I'm with . . . friends.' For some reason she did not want him to know she had been brought here by Solly.

On impulse Hugh said, 'Come out with me tonight. We'll go to Cremorne Gardens and dance.'

She was tempted, but she thought of Solly. 'No, thank you.'

'Why not?'

She asked herself the same question. She was not in love with Solly and she was taking no money from him. I'm eighteen years old, she thought, and if I can't go dancing with a boy I like, what's the point in living? 'All right, then.'

He grinned. She had made him happy. 'Shall I fetch you?'

She did not want him to see the Soho slum where she shared a room with April. 'No, let's meet somewhere.'

'All right—Westminster Pier. We'll take the steamer to Chelsea.'

'Yes!' She felt more excited than she had for months. 'What time?' 'Eight o'clock?'

She made a rapid calculation. Solly and Tonio would want to stay until the last race. Then they had to get the train back. She would say goodbye to Solly at Victoria Station and walk to Westminster. She thought she could make it. 'But if I'm late, you'll wait?'

'All night, if necessary.'

She put out her hand and they shook. 'Until tonight,' she said.

'I'll be there.'

She found her friends where she had left them. April and Tonio were looking triumphant. As soon as April saw Maisie she said, 'We've won a hundred and ten pounds— isn't it wonderful?'

Maisie was happy for April. As she was congratulating them, Micky Miranda appeared, strolling along with his thumbs in the pockets of his dove-grey waistcoat. He had Edward Pilaster in tow, as always. Maisie was curious about their relationship. They were so different: Micky slim, immaculate, confident; Edward big, clumsy, hoggish. Why were they so inseparable?

They all talked about their winnings. Both Edward and Tonio had made a lot on a horse called Prince Charlie. Solly had won money then lost it again, and seemed to enjoy both equally. Micky did not say how he had fared, and Maisie guessed he had not bet much: he seemed too calculating a person to be a heavy gambler. However, with his next breath he surprised her. He said to Solly, 'We're having a heavyweight card game tonight at the club, Greenbourne—a pound minimum. Will you join in?'

Solly would go along with anything. 'I'll join in,' he said.

Micky turned to Tonio. 'Would you care to join us?' His take-it-or-leave-it tone sounded false to Maisie.

'Count on me,' Tonio said excitedly. 'I'll be there!'

April looked troubled. 'Tonio, not tonight—you promised me.' Maisie suspected that Tonio could not afford to play when the minimum stake was a pound.

'What did I promise?' he said with a wink at his friends.

She whispered something in his ear, and all the men laughed. But Tonio was not to be dissuaded. 'I'm lucky today,' he said. 'I shall play cards tonight.'

'That's settled, then,' said Micky.

He and Edward took their leave, and Tonio and April went to place a bet on the next race. Solly offered Maisie his arm and they strolled along the white-painted rail that bounded the track. After a while Solly said, 'Do you like me, Maisie?'

She stood on tiptoe, and kissed his cheek. 'I like you a lot.'

He looked into her eyes, and she was mystified to see tears behind his spectacles. 'Solly, dear, what is it?' she said.

'I like you, too,' he said. 'More than anyone I've ever met.'

'Thank you.' She was touched. It was unusual for Solly to show any emotion stronger than mild enthusiasm.

Then he said, 'Will you marry me?'

She was flabbergasted. Men of Solly's class did not propose to girls like her. They kept them as mistresses and had children by them, but they did not marry them. She was too astounded to speak.

Solly went on, 'I'd give you anything you want. Please say yes.'

Marriage to Solly! She would be unbelievably rich for ever and ever. A soft bed every night, a blazing fire in every room of the house, and she would never be cold again, never hungry.

He said, 'I love you so much, I'm just desperate for you.'

He really did love her. And that was the trouble. She did not love him. He deserved better. He deserved a wife who really loved him, not a hardhearted guttersnipe on the make. She felt close to tears. She said, 'You're the kindest, most gentle man I've ever met—'

'Don't say no, please?' he interrupted. 'If you can't say yes, say nothing. Think about it, at least for a day, perhaps longer.'

Maisie sighed. 'I'll think about it,' she said.

He beamed. 'Thank you.'

She shook her head ruefully. 'Whatever happens, Solly, I believe I'll never be proposed to by a better man.'

HUGH AND MAISIE TOOK the pleasure steamer from Westminster Pier to Chelsea. It was a warm, light evening, and the muddy river was busy with cockle-boats and barges. They steamed upstream, under the new railway bridge for Victoria Station, passing the flowers

of Battersea Fields, London's traditional duelling ground. Battersea Bridge was a ramshackle structure that looked ready to fall down. At its south end were chemical factories, but on the opposite side pretty cottages clustered around Chelsea Old Church, and naked children splashed in the shallows.

Less than a mile beyond the bridge they disembarked and walked up the wharf to the magnificent gilded gateway of Cremorne gardens. The gardens consisted of twelve acres of groves and grottoes, flowerbeds and lawns. It was dusk when Hugh and Maisie arrived, and there were Chinese lanterns in the trees and gaslight along the winding paths. The place was packed: many of the younger people who had been at the races had decided to finish the day here. They sauntered through the gardens, laughing and flirting, the girls in pairs, the young men in larger groups, the couples arm in arm.

The weather had been fine all day, sunny and warm, but now a storm threatened. Hugh was thrilled to have Maisie on his arm. She was wearing a blue-green gown with a low neckline and a bustle behind, and a sailor hat poised jauntily on her piled-up hair. She attracted a lot of admiring glances.

They passed a ballet theatre, an oriental circus and several shooting galleries, then went into a restaurant to dine. This was a new experience for Hugh. Although restaurants were becoming more common, they were mostly used by the middle classes: upper-class people still did not like the idea of eating in public.

Their dinner was quite expensive but Hugh had brought the money he had been saving for his next suit of clothes, nineteen shillings, so he had plenty of cash. When they left the restaurant the people in the gardens seemed more boisterous than earlier, no doubt because they had consumed a good deal of beer and gin in the interim.

They came upon a dance floor, and Hugh took Maisie in his arms for the first time. His fingertips tingled as he rested his right hand in the small of her back, just above her bustle. He could feel the warmth of her body through her clothing. With his left hand he held hers, and she gave it a squeeze: the sensation thrilled him. At the end of the dance he smiled at her, and to his surprise she touched his mouth with a fingertip. 'I like it when you grin,' she said. 'You look boyish.'

'Boyish' was not exactly the impression he was trying to give, but at this point anything that pleased her was all right with him.

They danced again. They were good partners: although Maisie was short, Hugh was only a little taller, and they were both light on their feet. He had danced with dozens of girls, but he had never enjoyed it this much. 'Are you tired?' he asked her at the end of the dance.



‘Certainly not!’

They stayed on the floor until midnight, when the music stopped and all the couples left the dance floor and moved on to the garden paths. Hugh noticed that many of the men kept their arms round their partners so, with some trepidation, he did the same. Maisie did not seem to mind.

The festivities were becoming unruly. Beside the paths there were occasional cabins, like boxes at the opera, where people could sit and dine and watch the crowds walk by. Some of the cabins had been rented by groups of undergraduates who were now drunk. Maisie and Hugh had to detour around a scuffle involving six or seven young men, all shouting, punching and knocking one another down. Then a group of thirty or forty came charging along, pushing women aside and throwing men to the ground. Hugh stood in front of Maisie with his back to the onslaught, then took off his hat and put both arms round her, holding her tight. The mob swept by. A heavy shoulder hit Hugh in the back, and he staggered, still holding Maisie; but he managed to remain upright. On one side of him a man was punched in the face. Then the hooligans were gone.

Hugh relaxed his grip and looked down at Maisie. She looked back at him expectantly. Hesitantly, he leaned down and kissed her lips. They were deliciously soft and mobile. He closed his eyes. He had waited years for this: it was his first kiss. And it was as delightful as he had dreamed. He wanted never to stop.

She broke the kiss, looked hard at him, then hugged him tight, pulling his body against hers. ‘You could spoil all my plans,’ she said. He was not sure what she meant.

He looked to one side. There was a bower with an empty seat. Screwing up his courage, he said, ‘Shall we sit down?’

‘All right.’

They made their way into the darkness and sat on the seat. Hugh kissed her again, more passionately than before. She responded enthusiastically. It surprised him that she should be so keen, though he knew of no reason why girls should not like kissing as much as men did. He stroked her cheek and neck, and his hand fell to her shoulder. Her skin was soft and warm, and her breath was hot against his neck.

Suddenly she froze. ‘Listen,’ she said.

Hugh had been vaguely aware that the gardens were getting very noisy, and now he was hearing shouting. Looking towards the footpath he saw that everyone was running in different directions. ‘There must be a fight,’ he said. Then he heard a police whistle.

‘We’d better leave,’ Maisie said.

'Let's cut across the lawns—it might be quicker.'

As they stepped off the path, the gaslights went out.

They pressed forward in the dark. Now there was a continuous clamour of shouting and screaming, punctuated by police whistles. It suddenly occurred to Hugh that he might be arrested. Then Augusta would say he was too dissolute to be given a responsible post at the bank. He groaned. Then he recalled how it had felt to kiss Maisie, and he did not care what Augusta said.

As they approached the gate a troop of thirty or forty policemen entered. Fighting against the flow of the crowd, they started indiscriminately clubbing men and women. The crowd turned and began to run. Hugh thought fast. 'Let me carry you,' he said to Maisie.

She looked puzzled but said, 'All right.'

He picked her up. 'Pretend you've fainted,' he said, and she went limp. He walked forward, against the press of the crowd, shouting, 'Make way, there! Make way!' in his most authoritative voice. Seeing an apparently sick woman, even the fleeing people tried to get out of the way. He came up against the advancing policemen, who were as panicky as the public. 'Stand aside, Constable! Let the lady through!' he shouted at one of them. The man looked hostile and for a moment he thought his bluff would be called. Then a sergeant shouted, 'Let the gentleman pass!' He advanced through the line of police and suddenly found himself in the clear.

Maisie opened her eyes and he smiled at her. He liked holding her this way and he was in no hurry to lay down his burden. 'Are you all right?'

She nodded. She seemed tearful. 'Put me down.'

He put her down gently. 'I say, don't cry. It's over now.'

She shook her head. 'It's not the riot,' she said. 'I've seen fights before. But this is the first time anyone ever took care of me. All my life I've had to look after myself. It's a new experience.'

He did not know what to say. All the girls he had ever met assumed that men would take care of them. Being with Maisie was a constant revelation. He looked about for a cab. There were none to be seen. 'I'm afraid we may have to walk.'

'When I was eleven years old I walked for four days to get to Newcastle,' she said. 'I think I can make it from Chelsea to Soho.'

MICKY MIRANDA KNEW that cheating at cards was the worst crime a gentleman could commit in England. If he were caught tonight it would not just mean the failure of his scheme to ruin Tonio. He would be forced to go back to Cordova, endure the taunts of his older

brother, and spend the rest of his life raising cattle. The thought made him feel ill.

But the rewards were as dramatic as the risks. He was not doing this just to please Augusta. He wanted Tonio's job. Papa had said Micky would have to earn his keep. Tonio's job would enable Micky to live like a gentleman while doing hardly any work.

Micky, Edward, Solly and Tonio dined early at the Cowes, the club they all favoured. By ten o'clock they were in the card room, joined at the baccarat table by two other club gamblers: Captain Carter and Viscount Montagne. There was a white line drawn round the table ten or twelve inches from the edge. Each player had a pile of gold sovereigns in front of him, outside the white square. Once money crossed the line into the square it was staked.

Micky licked his lips nervously, caught himself, and tried to relax. Of all games the cardsharp's favourite was baccarat. It might have been invented, Micky thought, to enable the smart to steal from the rich. In the first place, it was a game purely of chance. The player received two cards and added up their values. If the total came to more than nine, only the last digit counted; so fifteen was five, twenty was zero, and the highest possible score was nine. A player with a low score could draw a third card, which would be dealt face up, so everyone could see. The banker dealt three hands: one to his left, one to his right, and one to himself. Players bet on either the left or the right hand. The banker paid out to any hand higher than his own.

The second advantage of baccarat, from the cheat's point of view, was that it was played with a pack of at least three decks of cards. This meant the cheat could use a fourth deck and confidently deal a card out of his sleeve without worrying whether another player already had the same card.

While the others were making themselves comfortable Micky asked a waiter for three new decks of cards. When the man came back he naturally handed the cards to Micky. To control the game Micky had to deal, so his first challenge was to make sure he was banker. This involved two tricks: neutralising the cut, and second-card dealing.

He broke the seals. The cards were always packed with the jokers on top, the ace of spades at the bottom. Micky took out the jokers and shuffled, enjoying the slippery feel of the new cards. It was the simplest of operations to move an ace from the bottom to the top; but then he had to let another player cut the cards without moving the ace from the top.

He passed the pack to Solly, sitting on his right. As he put it down he contracted his hand a fraction, so that the top card—the ace of

spades—stayed in his palm. Solly cut. Keeping his hand palm-downward to conceal the ace, Micky picked up the pack, replacing the hidden card on top as he did so.

‘High card gets the bank?’ he said, forcing himself to sound indifferent as to whether they said yes or no.

There was a murmur of assent.

Holding the pack firmly, he slid the top card back a fraction of an inch and began to deal fast, keeping the top card back and dealing the second until he came to himself, when he dealt the ace. They all turned over their cards. Micky’s was the only ace, so he was banker. He managed a casual smile. ‘I think I’m going to be lucky tonight,’ he said, and he dealt the first hand.

Tonio was playing on his left, with Viscount Montagne and Edward. On his right were Solly and Captain Carter. Micky did not want to win. He just wanted Tonio to lose.

He played fair for a while, losing a little of Augusta’s money. The others relaxed and ordered another round of drinks. When the time was right, Micky lit a cigar. In the inside pocket of his dress coat, next to his cigar case, was another deck of cards—bought at the stationer’s in St James’s Street where the club’s playing cards came from, so that they would match. He had arranged the extra deck in winning pairs, all giving a total of nine.

Returning his cigar case to his pocket, he palmed the extra deck; then, picking up the pack from the table with his other hand, he slid the new cards to the bottom of the old pack. While the others mixed their brandy and water he shuffled, bringing to the top of the pack, in order, one card from the bottom, two cards at random, another from the bottom, and another two at random. Then, dealing first to his left, then to his right, then to himself, he gave himself the winning pair. Next time around he gave Solly’s side a winning hand. For a while he continued the same way, making Tonio lose and Solly win.

Tonio had started by putting most of the money he had won at the races on the table—about a hundred pounds. When it was down to about fifty, he stood up and said, ‘This side is unlucky—I’m going to sit by Solly.’

That won’t help you, Micky thought. It was no more difficult to make the left side win from now on. He studied his victim’s mental state while he smoothly manipulated the cards. It was not enough that Tonio should be cleaned out. Micky wanted him to play with borrowed money and be unable to repay his debts. But Tonio was not a complete fool and there was a chance he might have the sense to draw back from the brink of ruin.



When Tonio's money was almost gone Micky took out his cigar case again. 'These are from home, Tonio,' he said. 'Try one.' To his relief, Tonio accepted. The cigars were long and would take a good half-hour to smoke. Tonio would not leave before finishing his. When they had lit up Micky moved in for the kill. A couple of hands later Tonio was broke. 'Well, that's everything I won at Goodwood this afternoon,' he said despondently.

'We ought to give you a chance to win it back,' Micky said. 'Pilaster will lend you a hundred pounds, I'm sure.'

Edward looked startled, but it would be ungenerous to refuse when he had a big pile of winnings, and he said, 'By all means.'

Solly intervened. 'Perhaps you should retire, Silva, and be grateful that you've had a great day's gambling at no cost.'

Micky silently cursed Solly for being a good-natured nuisance. If Tonio did the sensible thing now the whole scheme was ruined. But it was not in Tonio's nature to gamble prudently, and as Micky had calculated, he could not resist the temptation to carry on. 'I might as well play until I finish my cigar,' he said.

Micky let out a discreet sigh of relief.

Tonio beckoned to a waiter and ordered pen, paper and ink. Edward counted out a hundred sovereigns and Tonio scribbled an IOU. Micky knew that Tonio could never repay the debt.

The game went on until Tonio was down to fifty pounds again. 'I only win when I gamble high,' he said. 'I'm putting the lot on this next hand.' It was a big bet. If Tonio lost he was finished.

Micky dealt the cards. He looked at Edward, on the left, who tapped his cards, indicating that he wanted a third. Micky dealt him a four of clubs and turned to Solly. Solly passed. Micky turned over his cards and showed a five and a four. Edward had a four showing, and turned over a worthless king and another four, making eight. His side had lost. Solly turned up a two and a four. The right side had also lost to the banker.

Tonio turned pale and looked ill, and muttered something that Micky recognised as a Spanish curse. He was ruined.

IN THE EARLY HOURS of the morning Maisie and Hugh walked hand in hand through the new suburbs of Fulham and South Kensington. Maisie felt bewildered but happy. Something odd had happened tonight. She did not understand it but she liked it.

It had started while they were dancing. Until then she had not been aware that this was going to be radically different from any previous evening spent with an upper-class young man. Hugh was more

charming than most, and he looked good in his white waistcoat and silk tie, but still he was just a nice boy. Then, on the dance floor, she had begun to think how pleasant it would be to kiss him. And when finally they had kissed, it had been delicious, unlike any kiss she had had before. Yet he was not skilful or experienced. Quite the reverse. So why had she enjoyed it so much?

They reached Kensington Gore and turned right, along the south side of the park, heading for the city centre where she lived. Hugh stopped opposite a huge house whose front was illuminated by two gaslights. He put his arm round her shoulders. 'That's my Aunt Augusta's house,' he said. 'That's where I live.'

She put her arm round his waist and stared at the house, wondering what it was like to live in such a vast mansion. It reminded her that she and Hugh lived on separate islands in society, divided by an ocean of money and privilege. The thought troubled her. 'I was born in a one-room hut,' she said.

'In the northeast?'

'No, in Russia.'

'Really? Maisie Robinson doesn't sound like a Russian name.'

'I was born Miriam Rabinowicz.'

'Miriam,' he said softly. 'I like it.' He drew her to him and kissed her. Her anxiety evaporated and she gave herself up to the sensation, drinking his kisses thirstily, like a glass of cold water on a hot day.

Then it started to rain. There was a flash of lightning, a clap of thunder, and an instant downpour. By the time they broke the kiss their faces were wet. Hugh seized her hand. 'Let's take shelter in the house!' he said.

They ran across the road. Hugh led her down the steps, past a sign saying 'Tradesmen's Entrance', to the basement area. By the time they reached the doorway she was soaked to the skin. Hugh unlocked the door. Putting a finger to his lips to indicate silence, he ushered her inside. She hesitated for a fraction of a second, wondering whether she should ask exactly what he had in mind; but the thought slipped away and she stepped through the door.

They tiptoed through a kitchen the size of a small church to a narrow staircase. She followed him up three long flights, then they emerged on a landing. He glanced through an open doorway into a bedroom where a nightlight burned. He said, 'Edward's still out. There's no one else on this floor. Aunt and Uncle's rooms are on the floor below us and the servants above. Come.'

He led her into his bedroom and turned up the gaslight. 'I'll fetch towels,' he said, and he went out again.

She took off her hat and looked round the room. It was furnished simply, with a single bed, a dresser, a plain wardrobe and a small desk. On the desk was a framed photograph of a woman and a girl.

Hugh came back with a pile of towels. Maisie took one. It was warm from an airing cupboard, and she buried her wet face in it gratefully. This is what it's like to be rich, she thought: warm towels whenever you need them. 'Who's the picture of?' she asked.

'My mother and sister. My sister was born after my father died.'

'What's her name?'

'Dorothy. I call her Dotty. I'm very fond of her.'

'Where do they live?'

'In Folkestone, by the sea.'

Maisie wondered if she would ever meet them.

Hugh drew up the chair from the desk and made her sit down. He knelt in front of her, took off her shoes, and dried her wet feet with a fresh towel. She closed her eyes: the sensation of the soft towel on her feet was exquisite.

Her dress was wet through, and she shivered. She knew she could not get dry without taking it off. Underneath she was quite decent. She was not wearing knickers—only rich women did—but she had on a full-length petticoat and a chemise. Impulsively she stood up, turned her back to Hugh and said, 'Will you undo me?'

She could feel his hands shaking as his fingers fumbled with the hooks and eyes that fastened her dress. When he was done she thanked him, stepped out of the dress and turned to face him.

His expression was a touching mixture of embarrassment and desire. He stood like Ali Baba staring at the thieves' treasure. She had thought that she would simply dry herself with a towel and put her dress back on when it had dried, but now she knew it was not going to be like that. And she was glad. She put her hands on his cheeks, pulled his head down and kissed him. This time she opened her mouth, expecting him to do the same, but he did not. He had never kissed that way, she guessed. She teased his lips with the tip of her tongue. She sensed that he was shocked but excited too, and after a moment he opened his mouth a fraction and responded shyly with his tongue. She felt as if she were melting inside. She wanted more of this, now and always.

'Maisie,' he said.

She looked at him.

'I want to . . .'

She smiled. 'So do I.' She had no doubts. She wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything.

He stroked her hair. 'I've never done it before,' he said.

'Nor have I.'

He stared at her. 'But I thought—' He stopped.

She felt a spasm of anger, then controlled herself. It was her own fault if he had thought she was promiscuous. 'Let's lie down,' she said.

He sighed happily, then said, 'Are you sure?'

'Am I sure?' she repeated. She had never known a man who would ask that question. They never thought about how she felt. She took his hand and kissed the palm. 'If I wasn't sure before, I am now.'

She lay down on the narrow bed. The mattress was hard but the sheet was cool. He lay beside her and she sensed him fumbling with his trousers. Then he lowered his face to hers and kissed her lips, gently at first and then passionately. She put her hands on his waist, lifted her hips off the bed a little, then pulled him to her. There was a pain, sharp enough to make her cry out, then something gave way inside her and she gave herself up to the sensation. Distantly, above the noise of his breathing and hers, she heard a door open. She was so absorbed in her feelings for Hugh that the sound failed to alarm her.

Suddenly a harsh voice shattered the mood like a stone through a window. 'Well, well, Hugh—what's all this?'

Maisie and Hugh froze.

The sneering voice came again. 'Do you think this is a brothel?'

Maisie whispered, 'Hugh—get off me.'

He withdrew from her and rolled off the bed. She saw his cousin Edward standing in the doorway, smoking a cigar. Hugh quickly covered her with a big towel. She pulled it up to her neck.

Edward grinned nastily. 'If you've finished I might give her a go.'

Hugh wrapped a towel round his waist. 'You're drunk, Edward—go to your room before you say something completely unforgivable.'

Edward approached the bed. 'Why, it's Solly Greenbourne's dollymop! I won't tell him—so long as you're nice to me.'

Maisie saw that he was in earnest, and she shuddered with loathing.

Hugh was enraged. 'Get out of here, you damn fool,' he said.

'Be a sport,' Edward persisted. 'After all, she's only a whore.' With that he reached down and snatched away Maisie's towel.

Hugh crossed the room and hit Edward a mighty punch on the nose. Blood spurted and Edward let out a roar of agony. Hugh hit him again. Edward screamed in pain and blundered to the door. Hugh went after him, throwing punches at the back of his head. Edward fell through the doorway.

Maisie followed them. Edward was stretched out on the floor and



Hugh was sitting on top of him, still hitting him. She cried: 'Hugh, stop, you'll kill him!' She tried to grab Hugh's arms, but he was in a fury and it was hard to restrain him. A moment later she glimpsed a movement out of the corner of her eye. She looked up and saw Hugh's aunt, Augusta, standing at the top of the stairs in a black silk peignoir, staring at her. At first Maisie could not read her expression; then, after a moment, she understood. It was a look of triumph.

AS SOON AS AUGUSTA saw the naked girl she sensed that this was her chance to get rid of Hugh once and for all. She recognised her immediately. This was the trollop who had insulted her in the park, the one they called The Lioness. The outlines of a plan were forming in Augusta's mind when suddenly she saw Edward lying on the floor with blood all over his face. Her old fears rose up in force, and she was taken back twenty-three years, to when he had nearly died as a baby. 'Teddy!' she screamed. 'What's happened to Teddy!' She fell to her knees beside him, possessed by an unbearable dread.

Edward sat up and groaned, and her terror eased. He was conscious. 'What happened?' she said.

'I caught Hugh with his whore, and he went mad!' Edward said.

She reached out and touched Edward's nose. He gave a yelp, but permitted her to press delicately. Nothing broken, she thought.

She heard her husband's voice say, 'What the deuce is going on?'

She stood up. 'Hugh has attacked Edward,' she said.

'Is the boy all right?'

'I think so.'

Joseph turned to Hugh. 'Damnation, sir, what do you mean by it?'

'The silly fool asked for it,' Hugh said defiantly.

That's right, Hugh, make it worse, Augusta thought. Whatever you do, don't apologise. I want your uncle to stay angry with you. She began to think rapidly. How could she best exploit this situation? First she had to separate him from the girl.

Some servants had appeared and were hovering in the doorway that led to the back stairs, fascinated by the scene on the landing. Augusta saw her butler, Hastead. 'Hastead, help Mr Edward to his bed, will you?' He bustled forward and got Teddy to his feet.

Next Augusta spoke to her housekeeper. 'Mrs Merton, cover this girl with a sheet, or something, and take her to my room and get her dressed.' Mrs Merton took off her own dressing gown and draped it round the girl's shoulders.

Augusta said, 'Hugh, run to Dr Humboldt's house in Church Street: he'd better have a look at poor Edward's nose.'



'I'm not leaving Maisie,' Hugh said.

Augusta said sharply, 'Since you've done the damage, it's the least you can do to fetch a doctor!'

Maisie said, 'I'll be all right, Hugh. I'll be here when you get back.'

He was still reluctant to go, but he could think of no good reason to refuse. After a moment he said, 'I'll put my boots on.'

Augusta concealed her relief. She had separated them. Now, if her luck held, she would be able to seal Hugh's fate. She turned to her husband. 'Come. Let's go to your room and discuss this.'

They went down the stairs and entered his bedroom. As soon as the door was closed Augusta said, 'He can't continue to live here.'

Joseph was not disposed to argue that point. 'Indeed not.'

'You must discharge him from the bank,' she went on.

Joseph hesitated. 'I suppose I must,' he said after a moment. 'I imagine he will go back to his mother in Folkestone.'

Augusta immediately saw she had made a mistake. Hugh would be even more dangerous if he were resentful and knocking around with nothing to do. David Middleton had not yet approached him, but sooner or later he would. 'Perhaps we're being harsh,' she said.

He raised his eyebrows, surprised at this sudden display of mercy.

Augusta went on, 'Well, you keep saying that he has a great deal of potential as a banker. Perhaps it's unwise to throw that away.' She sat down to think, and suddenly she was inspired. 'Send him abroad.'

'Eh?'

The more she thought of the idea, the better she liked it. 'The Far East, or South America,' she went on, warming to her theme. 'Some place where his bad behaviour will not reflect directly on my house.'

'It's not a bad idea,' Joseph said reflectively. 'There's an opening in the United States. The old boy who runs our Boston office needs an assistant.'

America would be perfect, Augusta thought. 'Let him go as soon as possible,' she said. 'I don't want him in the house another day.'

'He can book his passage in the morning,' Joseph said, 'and stay with his mother until his ship sails.'

And he won't see David Middleton for years, Augusta thought with satisfaction. Were there any other snags? She remembered Maisie. Did Hugh care for her? It seemed unlikely, but anything was possible. He might refuse to be parted from her. It was a loose end, and it worried Augusta. She stood up and moved to the door that communicated with her bedroom.

Maisie was clothed again and pinning her hat to her hair. Mrs Merton was cramming a rather flashy blue-green gown into a cheap

bag. 'I've loaned her a dress of mine, as hers is soaked, mum,' said the housekeeper.

That answered a question that had been nagging Augusta. It was unlike Hugh to do something as stupid as to bring home a whore. Now she saw how it had come about. They had been caught in the storm, and Hugh had brought the woman inside to get dry, then one thing had led to another. 'What is your name?' she said to the girl.

'Maisie Robinson. I know yours.'

Augusta loathed Maisie Robinson. She was not sure why: the girl was hardly worthy of such strong feelings. It had something to do with her proud voluptuous look. 'I suppose you want money,' Augusta said disdainfully.

'You hypocritical cow,' Maisie said. 'You didn't marry that rich, ugly husband of yours for love.'

It was the truth, and the words took Augusta's breath away. She had underestimated this young woman. She swallowed hard and forced herself to sound neutral. 'Will you sit down for a moment?' She indicated a chair.

Maisie looked surprised, but she took a seat.

Augusta sat opposite her. The girl had to be made to give Hugh up. Money would not work, and Augusta sensed that Maisie was not the type to be bullied either. It would work best if Maisie thought that giving Hugh up was her own idea. And that might be best achieved by Augusta arguing the opposite. Now, there was a good notion . . .

Augusta said, 'If you want to marry him, I can't stop you.'

'What makes you think I want to marry him?' Maisie said.

Augusta almost laughed. She wanted to say, 'The fact that you're a scheming little gold-digger,' but instead she said, 'What girl wouldn't want to marry him? He's personable and good-looking and his prospects are excellent.'

Maisie narrowed her eyes. 'It sounds as if you want me to marry him.'

Augusta intended to give exactly that impression, but she had to tread delicately. Maisie was too bright to be easily hoodwinked. 'Let's not be fanciful, Maisie,' she said. 'No woman of my class would wish a man of her family to marry quite so far below him.'

Maisie showed no resentment. 'She might if she hated him enough.'

Feeling encouraged, Augusta continued to lead her on. 'But why would I hate Hugh?'

'Because he shows up that ass of a son of yours, Edward.'

A wave of anger engulfed Augusta. Once again Maisie had come uncomfortably close to the truth. 'I think you had better not mention



the name of my son,' Augusta said in a low voice.

Maisie grinned. 'I seem to have touched a sore place.' She became grave again. 'So that's your game. Well, I won't play it.'

'What do you mean?' said Augusta.

Suddenly there were tears in Maisie's eyes. 'I like Hugh too much to ruin him.'

Augusta was surprised and pleased by the strength of Maisie's passion. 'What are you going to do?' Augusta asked.

Maisie struggled not to cry. 'I shan't see him any more. You may yet destroy him, but you won't have my help.'

'He might come after you.'

'I shall disappear. He doesn't know where I live.' Maisie wiped her face on her sleeve. 'I'll go now, before he comes back.' She stood up. 'Thank you for lending me your dress, Mrs Merton.'

The housekeeper opened the door for her. 'I'll show you out.'

Augusta let out a long breath. She had done it. She had stunted Hugh's career, neutralised Maisie Robinson, and averted the danger from David Middleton, all in one night.

MICKY MIRANDA LIVED in two rooms of a house in Camberwell. At nine o'clock each morning the landlady brought coffee and hot rolls for him and Papa. Over breakfast, Micky explained how he had caused Tonio Silva to lose a hundred pounds he did not have. Then he turned his mind to the next step. He wanted Edward and Tonio to quarrel publicly. If he could arrange that, Tonio's disgrace would become general knowledge and he would be obliged to resign from his job and go home to Cordova. That would put him comfortably out of the reach of David Middleton. Micky wanted to do all this without making an enemy of Tonio. For he wanted Tonio to persuade the minister that Micky should replace him as attaché.

While Micky was brooding over this tricky problem, there was a knock at the door and the landlady announced a visitor. A moment later Tonio came in. 'Sit down, have some coffee,' Micky said cheerfully. 'Bad luck last night!'

Tonio bowed to Papa and sat down. He looked as if he had not slept. 'I lost more than I can afford,' he said.

Papa grunted. He despised the Silva family as lily-livered city dwellers who lived by patronage and corruption.

Micky pretended sympathy and said solemnly, 'I'm sorry.'

'You know what it means. In this country, a man who doesn't pay his gambling debts isn't a gentleman. And a man who isn't a gentleman can't be a diplomat. I might have to resign and go home.'

Exactly, thought Micky; but he said, 'I do see the problem.'

'That's why I've come to you.'

'I don't understand,' said Micky, though he understood perfectly.

'Will you give me the money?' Tonio pleaded. 'You're Cordovan: you don't condemn a man for one mistake. And I would pay you back, eventually.'

'If I had the money I'd give it to you,' said Micky. 'I wish I were that well off.'

Tonio looked at Papa, who stared at him coldly and said, 'No.'

Tonio hung his head. 'I don't know what to do,' he said in a hollow voice. 'If I go home in disgrace I won't be able to face my family.'

Micky said thoughtfully, 'Perhaps there is something I can do.'

Tonio brightened. 'Oh, please, anything!'

'Edward and I are good friends, as you know. I could explain your circumstances to him, and ask him to be lenient—as a favour to me.'

'Would you?' Tonio's face was suffused with hope.

'I'll ask him to wait for his money. I don't say he'll agree to it, mind you. The Pilasters are a hardheaded bunch. But I'll try.'

Tonio clasped Micky's hand. 'I don't know how to thank you—'

'Don't thank me,' Micky said, holding up his hand in a silencing gesture. 'It's unlucky. Wait and hope.'

'Yes. All right. When will I see you?'

'Meet me at the club at lunchtime.'

'Right.' Tonio stood up and bowed again to Papa. 'Goodbye, Señor Miranda.' He went out.

'Stupid boy,' Papa muttered.

'A complete fool,' Micky agreed.

Micky went into the next room and dressed in his morning clothes: a white shirt with upright collar and starched cuffs, buff-coloured trousers, a black satin stock which he tied perfectly, and a black double-breasted frock coat. His shoes gleamed with wax and his hair shone with Macassar oil.

Leaving Papa to his own devices, he walked to the financial district, which was called the City because it covered the square mile of the original Roman city of London.

Pilasters Bank was a big new building with an imposing entrance flanked by massive fluted pillars. It was a few minutes past noon when Micky went through the double doors into the banking hall. He approached one of the 'walkers' and said, 'Be good enough to tell Mr Edward Pilaster that Mr Miranda has called.'

'Very good, sir.'

After a few minutes Edward appeared—with a bruised nose and a

black eye. Micky raised his eyebrows. 'My dear fellow, what happened to you?'

'I had a fight with Hugh. I told him off for bringing a whore into the house and he lost his temper.'

It occurred to Micky that this might have given Augusta the opportunity that she had been seeking to get rid of Hugh. 'What happened to Hugh?'

'He's been sent to Boston.'

Well done, Augusta, thought Micky. It would be neat if both Hugh and Tonio could be dealt with on the same day. He said, 'You look as if you might benefit from a bottle of champagne and some lunch.'

'Splendid idea.'

They left the bank, hailed a hansom and directed it to Pall Mall. As soon as they were on their way, Micky began his prepared speech. He started by saying, 'I hate a chap who spreads reports about another chap's bad behaviour.'

'Yes,' Edward said vaguely.

'And I'd hate you to think I kept quiet about it just because he was a countryman of mine.'

'I'm not sure I follow you.'

'I'm talking about Tonio Silva. I'm afraid he has no intention of paying the debt he owes you. Worse, he's been boasting about it, saying you aren't man enough to make him pay.'

Edward reddened. 'Has he, by the devil! We'll see about that.'

Micky fretted impatiently while the hansom crawled along the Strand. Tonio should be at the club by now. Edward was in just the right mood to quarrel. Everything was working out.

At last the cab pulled up outside the club. Micky waited while Edward paid the driver. They went inside. In the cloakroom, in a knot of people hanging up their hats, they met Tonio. Micky tensed. He had put everything in place; now he could only hope that the drama would play itself out as he had planned.

Tonio caught Edward's eye, looked awkward, and said, 'By Jove! Good morning, you two.'

Edward's face turned pink and his eyes bulged. 'See here, Silva.'

Tonio stared at him fearfully. 'What is it, Pilaster?'

Edward said loudly, 'About that hundred pounds.'

The room went suddenly quiet. It was bad behaviour to talk about money, and a gentleman would do so only in extreme circumstances.

Tonio went white. 'Yes?'

Edward said brutally, 'You can let me have it today, if it would suit your convenience.'

A challenge had been issued. As a gentleman, Tonio had only one option. He had to say, 'By all means. If it's important, you shall have your money right away.' If he did not do that, everyone would know he could not pay, and he would be ostracised.

A look of panic came over Tonio's face, and he spread his hands in a pleading gesture. Then he turned and ran.

Micky was elated: it had all gone perfectly. 'Order a brandy for me, Edward. I'd better go after Silva and make sure he doesn't throw himself under a horse bus.' He dashed out. This was the most subtle part of his plan: he had to convince the man he had ruined that he was his best friend.

Tonio was hurrying along in the direction of St James's. Micky caught up with him. 'I say, Silva, I'm dreadfully sorry,' he said.

Tonio stopped. There were tears on his cheeks. 'I'm finished,' he said.

'Pilaster turned me down flat,' Micky said. 'I did my best . . .'

'I know. Thank you.'

'Don't thank me. I failed.'

'But you tried. I wish there was something I could do to show my appreciation.'

Micky hesitated, thinking, Do I dare to ask him for his job right now? He decided to be bold. 'As a matter of fact there is—but we should talk about it another time.'

'No, tell me now. I don't know how many more days I'll be here.'

'Well . . .' Micky feigned embarrassment. 'I suppose the Cordovan Minister will eventually be looking for someone to replace you.'

'He'll need someone right away.' Comprehension showed on Tonio's tear-stained face. 'Of course! You'd be perfect!'

'If you could put in a word . . .'

'I'll do more than that. I'll tell him how you tried to get me out of this mess. I'm sure he'll want to appoint you.' Tonio took Micky's hand in both of his. 'You're a true friend.'

## SEPTEMBER

Hugh's six-year-old sister Dorothy was folding his shirts and packing them into his trunk. As soon as she went to bed he would have to repack them, because her folding was hopelessly untidy; but he pretended she was very good at it. He was feeling wistful: he would not see his baby sister again for years.



He was going to America at a time of crisis. Five New York banks had suspended business and the Stock Exchange had closed its doors. Trade would suffer, and Pilasters' American operation would get smaller and more cautious—so that it would be harder for Hugh to make his mark.

So far the crisis had had little impact in London. All the same, old Seth insisted there was trouble ahead. He had moved into Augusta's house and spent most days in bed. But he stubbornly refused to resign until he had steered Pilasters through the storm.

September rain drummed on the windows, and down in the bay the wind lashed the waves, but here there was a coal fire and a soft hearth-rug. Hugh began to fold his two new suits. His mother came into the room. She was in her seventh year of widowhood but she still wore black. She did not seem to want to marry again, although she easily could have—she was still beautiful, with serene grey eyes and thick blonde hair.

'It's almost bedtime, Dorothy,' she said. 'Go and put on your nightdress.' As soon as Dotty was out of the room, Mother began to refold Hugh's shirts.

He wanted to talk to her about Maisie, but he felt shy. Augusta had written to her, but the story Augusta had told her was probably a long way from the truth. After a moment he said, 'Mother . . .'

'What is it, dear?'

'Aunt Augusta doesn't always say quite what is true.'

'No need to be so polite,' she said with a bitter smile. 'Augusta has been telling lies for years.'

Hugh was startled by her frankness.

'Why?'

His mother put down the shirt she was folding and thought for a minute. 'Augusta was a very beautiful girl,' she said. 'Her father had three little grocery stores in the west London suburbs, but Augusta was clearly destined for higher things.'

She went to the rainy window and looked out, seeing not the stormy English Channel but the past.

'When she was seventeen the Earl of Strang fell for her. Naturally his parents were horrified at the prospect that he should marry a grocer's daughter. However, she was very beautiful, and even then, though she was young, she had a dignified air that could carry her through most social situations.'

'Did they become engaged?' Hugh asked.

'Not formally. But everyone assumed it was a foregone conclusion. Then there was a scandal. Her father was accused of systematically

giving short change in his shops. He denied it vehemently, and in the end nothing came of it. But Strang dropped Augusta.'

'She must have been heartbroken.'

'Not heartbroken. She was wild with rage. All her life she had had her own way. Now she wanted Strang and she couldn't have him.'

'And she married Uncle Joseph on the rebound, as they say?'

'I'd say she married him in a fit of temper. He was older than she by seven years, and not much better-looking than he is now; but he was rich. To give her credit, she has tried to be a good wife to him. But he will never be Strang, and she is still angry about that.'

'What happened to Strang?'

'He married a French countess and died in a hunting accident.'

'I almost feel sorry for Augusta.'

'No matter what she has, she always wants more: more money, a more important job for her husband, a higher social position for herself. She still yearns for what Strang could have given her: the title, the ancestral home. But Strang offered her love. That's what she's really lost. And nothing will ever make up for it.'

Hugh had never had such an intimate conversation with his mother. He felt encouraged to open his heart to her. 'Mother,' he began. 'About Maisie . . .'

She looked puzzled. 'Maisie?'

'The girl . . . all the trouble is about. Maisie Robinson.'

'Were you fond of her, Hugh?'

'Rather.' He felt tears come to his eyes. 'I don't understand why she disappeared. I've no idea where she went. I never knew her address. I've enquired at the Argyll Rooms where I first met her. Solly Greenbourne was fond of her too, and he's as baffled as I am.'

'How mysterious.'

'I'm sure Aunt Augusta arranged this somehow.'

'I have no doubt of it. I can't imagine how, but she is appallingly devious. However, you must look to the future now, Hugh.'

'She is an extraordinary girl. I wonder if I shall ever forget her.'

His mother kissed his forehead. 'You will. I promise.'

THERE WAS ONLY ONE picture on the wall in the attic room Maisie shared with April, a garish circus poster showing Maisie, in spangled tights, standing on the back of a galloping horse. Underneath, in red letters, were the words THE AMAZING MAISIE. Otherwise the room contained only a narrow bed, a washstand, one chair and a three-legged stool. The girls' clothes hung from nails banged into the wall. The dirt on the window served instead of curtains.

Maisie was getting dressed when April burst into the room with a newspaper in her hand. 'It's you, Maisie, it's you!' she said.

'What?'

'In the *Lloyd's Weekly News*. Listen. "If Miss Maisie Robinson, formerly Miriam Rabinowicz, will contact Messrs Goldman and Jay, Solicitors, at Gray's Inn, she will learn something to her advantage." It must be you!'

Maisie's heart beat faster, but she made her expression stern. 'It's Hugh,' she said. 'I'll not go.' Her heart ached. She thought about Hugh every day and every night, and she was miserable. She hardly knew him, but it was impossible to forget him. Nevertheless she was determined to try. She knew he had been searching for her, but she had made her decision. She loved him too much to ruin him. She put her arms into her corset. 'Help me with my stays.'

April began pulling the laces. 'I've never had my name in the paper,' she said enviously. 'You have twice, if you count "The Lioness" as a name.'

'And how much good has it done me? Oh Lord, I'm getting fat.'

April tied the laces and helped her into her gown. They were going out tonight. April had a new lover, and he and a friend were taking April and Maisie to a music hall.

Maisie's gown was tight across her breasts and she winced as April did it up. April gave her a curious look and said, 'Are your nipples sore?'

'Yes, they are—I wonder why?'

'Maisie, when did you last have the curse?'

'I never keep count.' Maisie thought for a moment, and a chill descended on her. 'Oh, dear God,' she said. 'I think it was before we went to the races at Goodwood. Am I pregnant?'

'Your waist is bigger and your nipples hurt and you haven't had the curse for two months—yes, you're pregnant.'

'Oh, Lord.' Maisie felt as if she had been hit by a train. She sat down on the bed and began to cry. 'What am I going to do?'

'We could go to that lawyer's office, for a start.'

SUDDENLY EVERYTHING was different. Maisie realised that she was now obliged to get in touch with Hugh, for the sake of the child inside her. And when she admitted this to herself she felt more glad than frightened. All the same she was nervous as she and April climbed the steep staircase to the lawyer's rooms at Gray's Inn.

The clerk, a young man wearing a mustard-coloured waistcoat, was disposed to flirt. 'Ladies!' he said. 'How could two such goddesses

have need of the services of Messrs Goldman and Jay?

Maisie had no patience with gallantry today. 'My name is Maisie Robinson,' she said.

'Aha! The advertisement. By a happy chance, the gentleman in question is with Mr Jay at this very minute.'

Maisie felt faint with trepidation. 'The gentleman in question . . . Is he by any chance Mr Hugh Pilaster?'

'Good Lord, no! I know Hugh Pilaster—we were at school together in Folkestone. He's gone to America.'

Maisie's hopes collapsed. She rocked back as if she had been punched. Gone to America. And she had his child inside her.

April said aggressively, 'Who is it, then?'

The clerk said nervously, 'I'd better let him tell you himself. Excuse me.' He disappeared through an inner door.

When the door opened again, a different man came out, a man of striking appearance. Not much older than Maisie, he had the face of a biblical prophet, with dark eyes staring out from under black eyebrows, a big nose with flaring nostrils, and a bushy beard. He reminded Maisie a little of her father.

'Maisie?' he said. 'Maisie Robinson?'

'Yes, I'm Maisie Robinson,' she said. 'Who are you?'

'Don't you recognise me?'

Suddenly she remembered a wire-thin boy with the first shadow of a moustache on his lip. 'Danny!' she yelled. For a moment she forgot her troubles as she ran to his arms. 'Danny, is it really you?'

He hugged her so hard it hurt. 'Sure it's me,' he said.

'Who?' April was saying. 'Who is he?'

'My brother!' Maisie said. 'The one that ran away to America!' She stared at Danny in disbelief. 'What have you been doing for the last seven years?' she said.

'Building railways. It so happened that I arrived at a good time. The Civil War had just ended and the railway boom was beginning. They were so desperate for workers that even a skinny thirteen-year-old could get a job. I helped build the Union Pacific Railroad in Utah. And I joined the trade union and led a strike.'

'Why did you come back?'

'There's been a stock-market crash. The railroads have run out of money, and the banks have gone bust. Thousands of men, hundreds of thousands, are looking for work. I decided to come home.'

'What will you do—build railroads here?'

He shook his head. 'I've got a new idea. Twice my life has been wrecked by a financial crash. The men who own banks are the



stupidest people in the world. They make the same mistakes again and again. And it's the working men who suffer. Nobody ever helps them—nobody ever will. They have to help each other. I'm going to start a kind of club for working men. They'll pay sixpence a week, and, if they're thrown out of work through no fault of their own, the club will pay them while they look for a new job.'

Maisie stared at her brother in admiration.

'But what about Papa and Mama?' he said. 'Have you been in touch with them?'

Maisie shook her head and then, surprising herself, she began to cry. Suddenly she felt again the pain of losing her family. Danny put a hand on her shoulder. 'I'll go up north and see if I can trace them.'

'I hope you can,' Maisie said. She caught the eye of April. 'But they'll be ashamed of me.'

'And why should they be?' he said.

'I'm pregnant.'

His face reddened. 'And not married?'

'No.'

'Going to get married?'

'No.'

Danny was angry. 'Who is the swine? I'd like to break his neck—'

'Shut up, Danny!' Maisie said angrily. 'You left me alone seven years ago and you've no business to come back and act as if you own me.' He looked abashed, and she went on in a quieter voice, 'It doesn't matter. He would have married me, I expect, but I didn't want him to, so forget about him.'

Danny calmed down. 'If I wasn't your brother I'd marry you myself. You're pretty enough! Anyway, you can have what little money I've got left.'

'I don't want it.' She was sounding ungracious, but she could not help it. 'There's no need for you to take care of me, Danny. I managed when I was eleven years old, so I suppose I can now.'

MICKY MIRANDA AND PAPA were in a small eating house in Soho, lunching off oyster stew—the cheapest dish on the menu—and strong beer. The restaurant was a few minutes from the Cordovan Ministry in Portland Place, where Micky now sat at a writing table every morning for an hour or two, dealing with the minister's mail. He was finished for the day and had met Papa for lunch. They sat opposite each other on hard wooden high-backed benches. Papa wiped his bowl with a chunk of bread and pushed it aside. 'I must explain something to you,' he said.

Micky put down his spoon.

Papa said, 'I need rifles to fight the Delabarca family. When I have destroyed them I will take over their nitrate mines. But that is only the first step.'

Micky's ears pricked up.

'I plan to become governor of the province.'

Governor! Micky had not realised Papa's aspirations were so high.

But he had not finished. 'When we control the province, we will become fervent supporters of President Garcia. You will be his envoy in London. Your brother will become his Minister of Justice. Your uncles will be generals. When the time is right, we will move the Garcia family aside and we will step in.'

'We will take over the government?' Micky said, wide-eyed.

'Yes. In twenty years' time, my son, either I will be President of Cordova . . . or you will.'

Papa surprised Micky by the subtlety of his strategy: to become a fervent supporter of the current ruler and then betray him.

'President,' he said dreamily. 'I like it.'

Papa reached out casually and slapped his face. The old man had a powerful arm and a horny hand, and the slap rocked Micky. He tasted blood in his mouth. Papa reached across the table with both hands and grabbed him by the lapels. In a voice full of scorn he said, 'This entire plan has been put at risk because you have completely failed in the small task allotted to you!'

Micky was terrified of him in this mood. 'Papa, you'll get your rifles!' he said.

'I have booked passage on a freighter bound for Panama. The captain has been bribed to put me and the weapons ashore on the Atlantic coast of Santamaria.' Papa stood up, dragging Micky upright, tearing his shirt by the force of his grip. 'The ship sails in five days' time. Now get out of here and buy me those guns!'

AUGUSTA WAS ALONE in the drawing room when Micky arrived. She looked pleased to see him, but he was desperately worried. 'How is old Seth?' he asked, hoping to hear of a sudden relapse.

'Seth is much better.'

Micky's heart sank.

'He may be with us for years yet.' She could not keep the irritation out of her voice. She was impatient for her husband to take over. 'You know he is living here now. You shall visit him when you have had some tea.'

There were voices in the hall. 'There's something I must tell you

before the others come in,' Augusta said hastily. 'I have finally met Mr David Middleton.'

Micky nodded. 'What did he say?'

'He was polite, but frank. Said he did not believe the truth about his brother's death had been told, and asked if I could put him in touch with either Hugh Pilaster or Antonio Silva. I told him they were both abroad, and he was wasting his time.'

'I wish we could solve the problem of old Seth as neatly as we solved that one,' Micky said as the door opened.

Edward came in, then his sister Clementine. Augusta poured tea, and Hastead brought in hot buttered muffins. Edward ate several but Micky had no appetite. More family members arrived: Joseph's brother Young William; Joseph's ugly sister Madeleine; and Major Hartshorn, Madeleine's husband, with the scar on his forehead. They all talked of the financial crisis, but Micky could tell they were not afraid: old Seth had seen it coming and had made sure that Pilasters Bank was not exposed. One by one they went up to visit him; one by one they came down and said how marvellous he was. Micky waited until last. He finally went up at half past five.

Seth was in what used to be Hugh's room. A nurse sat outside in case he should need her. Micky went in and closed the door. Seth was in bed reading *The Economist*. Micky said, 'Good afternoon, Mr Pilaster. How are you feeling?'

The old man put his journal aside with obvious reluctance. 'I'm feeling well, I thank you. How is your father?'

'Impatient to be home.' Micky stared at the frail old man on the white sheets. The skin of his face was translucent, but there was lively intelligence in the eyes. He looked as if he could live for another decade. Micky heard his father's voice in his ear: *Who is standing in our way?* The old man was weak, and there was only Micky in the room and the nurse outside. He could suffocate him with a pillow and everyone would think he had died a natural death.

'What's the matter?' Seth said. 'You look sicker than I.'

'Are you comfortable?' Micky said. 'Let me adjust your pillows.'

'Please don't trouble, they're all right,' said Seth, but Micky reached behind him and pulled out a big feather pillow.

Micky looked at the old man and hesitated.

Fear flashed in Seth's eyes and he opened his mouth to call out. Before he could make a sound Micky smothered his face with the pillow and pushed his head down. Unfortunately, Seth's arms were outside the bedclothes, and now his hands grasped Micky's forearms with surprising strength. Micky stared in horror at the aged talons

clamped to his coat sleeves, but he held on with all his might. At last all movement ceased. Micky lowered his head to Seth's chest to check for a heartbeat. Suddenly the old man's eyes opened and he took a huge, dragging breath.

Micky almost cried aloud with horror. He regained his wits and shoved the pillow over Seth's face again. He felt himself shaking with fear and disgust as he held it down; but there was no more resistance. A wave of nausea engulfed him, and he grabbed the bedpost to steady himself. I killed him, he thought. I killed him.

There was a voice on the landing.

Micky looked at the body on the bed. The pillow was still over Seth's face. He snatched it up. Seth's dead eyes were open and staring.

The door opened and Augusta walked in. She looked at the rumpled bed, the still face of Seth with its staring eyes, and the pillow in Micky's hands. The blood drained from her cheeks.

Micky stared at her, silent and helpless, waiting for her to speak.

Quietly, Augusta closed the door. She took the pillow from Micky. She lifted Seth's lifeless head and replaced the pillow, then she straightened the sheets. She picked up *The Economist* from the floor and placed it on his chest. Then she closed his eyes.

She came to Micky. 'You're shaking,' she said. She took his face in her hands and kissed his mouth. For a moment he was too stunned to react. Then he put his arms round her and embraced her. They clung together until Augusta broke away. 'This never happened,' she said in a fierce whisper. 'Do you understand me? *None of it ever happened!*' She smoothed the front of her dress, then turned and went to the door. He followed her out.

The nurse looked an enquiry at them. Augusta put her finger to her lips. 'He's just dropped off to sleep,' she said quietly.

'Best thing,' said the nurse. 'I'll leave him for an hour or so.'

Augusta nodded in agreement. 'I should, if I were you. Believe me, he's quite comfortable now.'

## Part Two – 1879

### JANUARY

Hugh returned to London after six years. In that period the Pilasters had doubled their wealth—and Hugh was partly responsible. He had done extraordinarily well in Boston. Transatlantic trade was booming as the United States recovered from the Civil War, and

Hugh had made sure Pilasters Bank was financing a healthy chunk of that business. He was being paid a thousand pounds a year, and he knew he was worth more.

He had told the partners he wanted to come home on furlough, to see his mother and sister, but he had another reason for returning to London. He was about to drop a bombshell. He had arrived with a proposal to merge Pilasters' North American operation with the New York bank of Madler and Bell. It would make a lot of money for the bank, and it would allow him to return to London and graduate from scout to decision maker. It would mean the end of his period of exile.

He straightened his tie nervously and went in. They were waiting for him in the partners' room: Uncle Joseph, sitting at the senior partner's desk, looking older and balder and more like old Seth; Aunt Madeleine's husband, Major Hartshorn, reading *The Times* beside the fire; Uncle Samuel, beautifully dressed as ever in a charcoal-grey double-breasted cutaway jacket with a pearl-grey waistcoat, frowning over a contract; and the newest partner, Young William, now thirty-one, sitting at his desk and writing in a notebook.

Hugh shook hands with all of them and accepted a glass of sherry. He looked around at the portraits of previous senior partners on the walls. 'Six years ago in this room I sold Sir John Cammel a hundred and ten thousand pounds' worth of Russian bonds,' he remembered.

'So you did,' said Samuel.

'Pilasters' commission on that sale was more than I've been paid in the entire eight years I've worked for the bank,' he said with a smile.

Joseph said tetchily, 'I hope you're not asking for a rise in salary. You're already the highest-paid employee in the entire firm.'

'Except the partners,' said Hugh.

'Naturally,' Joseph snapped.

Hugh perceived that he had got off to a bad start. Too eager, as always, he told himself. Slow down. 'I'm not asking for a rise,' he said. 'However, I do have a proposition to put to the partners.'

Hugh put his drink down untasted and gathered his thoughts. He desperately wanted them to agree to his proposition. It would bring more business to the bank at one stroke than most partners could attract in a year. And if they agreed they would be more or less obliged to make him a partner.

'Boston is no longer the financial centre of the United States,' he began. 'New York's the place now. We ought to move our office. But a good deal of the business I've done in the last six years has been undertaken jointly with the New York house of Madler and Bell. If we moved to New York we'd be in competition with them.'



'Nothing wrong with competition,' Major Hartshorn asserted.

'Perhaps. But I've got a better idea. Why not merge our North American operation with Madler and Bell? Set up a joint venture. Call it Madler, Bell and Pilaster. The new house would deal with all the import-export financing currently done by both houses, and the profits would be shared. Pilasters would have the chance to participate in all new issues marketed by Madler and Bell. I would handle that business from London.'

'I don't like it,' said Joseph. 'It's just handing over our business to someone else's control.'

'But you haven't heard the best part,' Hugh said. 'All of Madler and Bell's European business, currently distributed among several agents in London, would be handed over to Pilasters.'

Joseph grunted in surprise. 'That must amount to . . .'

'More than fifty thousand pounds a year in commissions.'

They were all startled. They had never set up a joint venture before, but the prospect of fifty thousand a year was irresistible.

Samuel said, 'You've obviously talked this over with them?'

'Yes. Sidney Madler is very keen, and so is his partner, John Bell.'

Young William said, 'You would supervise matters from London?'

Hugh saw that William regarded him as a rival who was much less dangerous three thousand miles away. 'Why not?' he said. 'After all, London is where the money is raised.'

'And what would your status be?'

It was a question Hugh would have preferred not to answer so soon. William had shrewdly raised it to embarrass him. Now he had to bite the bullet. 'Mr Madler and Mr Bell would expect to deal with a partner.'

'You're too young to be a partner,' Joseph said immediately.

'I'm twenty-six, Uncle,' Hugh said. 'You were made a partner when you were twenty-nine.'

'Three years is a long time.'

'And fifty thousand pounds is a lot of money,' Hugh realised he was sounding cocky—a fault he was prone to—and he backed off. 'I know you'll want to talk it over. Perhaps I should leave you?' Samuel nodded and Hugh went to the door. He did not know whether to be frustrated, because they had not agreed to his plan, or pleased that they had not turned it down flat. But there was no more he could do.

AT FOUR O'CLOCK that afternoon he stood outside Augusta's enormous house in Kensington Gore. Six years of London soot had darkened the red brick and smudged the white stone, but it still had

the statues of birds and beasts on the stepped gable, with the ship in full sail at the apex of the roof. It was a house full of memories for him. Here he had suffered Augusta's persecution, punched Edward's nose, and made love to Maisie Robinson. The recollection of Maisie was the most poignant. He had not heard anything of her since that night but he still thought about her every day of his life.

The door was opened by Hasteed, Augusta's oily butler. 'Good afternoon, Mr Hugh,' he said, but his Welsh voice was frosty, which indicated that Hugh was still out of favour in this house.

He passed through the entrance lobby and into the hall. There, like a reception committee, stood the three harridans of the Pilaster family: Augusta, her sister-in-law Madeleine, and her daughter Clementine. Augusta at forty-seven was as striking-looking as ever. If she was a little heavier than six years ago she had the height to carry it. 'Well, Hugh,' she said. 'I trust your foreign experiences have made you a wiser young man.'

She was not going to let anyone forget that he had left under a cloud. Hugh replied, 'I trust we all grow wiser as we age, dear Aunt,' and he had the satisfaction of seeing her face darken with anger.

Clementine said, 'Hugh, allow me to present my fiancé, Sir Harry Tonks.'

Hugh shook hands. 'What part of England are you from, Sir Harry?' he asked, probing into the man's background.

'I've a place in Dorsetshire. Most of my tenants grow hops.'

Landed gentry, Hugh concluded; if he has any sense he will sell his farms and put the money into Pilasters Bank.

'Come into the drawing room,' Augusta commanded. 'Everyone's waiting to see you.'

He followed her in. The familiar room, with the French windows leading to the long garden, had been redecorated in a profusion of bold, richly coloured patterns. Looking more closely, Hugh saw that they were all flowers: big yellow daisies in the carpet, red roses climbing a trellis in the wallpaper, poppies in the curtains. 'You've changed this room, Aunt,' he said superfluously.

Clementine said, 'It all comes from William Morris's new shop in Oxford Street—it's the latest thing.'

Most of the Pilaster family were here, all curious about Hugh. He had gone away in disgrace, but he had returned a hero, and they were keen to take a second look. The first person he shook hands with was his cousin Edward. He was twenty-nine but he looked older: he was already stout and his face had the flushed look of a glutton. 'So, you're back,' he said.

Micky Miranda stood next to Edward, as handsome and self-assured as ever. Hugh said, 'Hello, Miranda, are you still working for the Cordovan Minister?'

'I *am* the Cordovan Minister,' Micky replied.

Somehow Hugh was not surprised. He was pleased to see his old friend Rachel Bodwin.

'Hello, Rachel, how are you?' he said. She had never been a pretty girl but she was turning into a handsome woman. 'What are you doing these days?'

'Campaigning to reform the law on women's property,' she said. Then she grinned and added, 'To the embarrassment of my parents.'

Hugh wondered whether Augusta still wanted to make a match between the two of them. The only man Rachel had ever shown any interest in was Micky Miranda. Even now she was taking care to include Micky in the conversation. Hugh moved on and shook hands with Young William and his wife, Beatrice.

Hastead interrupted them to give Hugh an envelope. 'This just arrived by messenger,' he said. It contained a formal note:

*123, Piccadilly  
London, W.*

*Tuesday*

*Mrs Solomon Greenbourne requests the pleasure of your  
company at dinner tonight.*

Below, in a familiar scrawl, was written:

*Welcome home!—Solly.*

He was pleased. Solly was always amiable and easy-going.

Hastead said, 'The messenger is waiting for a reply, Mr Hugh.'

Hugh said, 'My compliments to Mrs Greenbourne, and I shall be delighted to join them for dinner.'

Hastead bowed and withdrew.

Beatrice said, 'My goodness, are you dining with the Solomon Greenbournes? How marvellous!'

Hugh was surprised. 'I don't expect it to be marvellous,' he said. 'I've always liked Solly, but an invitation to dine with him was never a coveted privilege.'

'It is now,' said Beatrice. 'They're part of the Marlborough Set, friends with the Prince of Wales.'

'Solly married a fireball,' William explained. 'Mrs Greenbourne loves to entertain, and her parties are the best in London.'

'Well,' said Hugh, 'I can't wait to meet her.'

PICCADILLY WAS A STREET of palaces. At eight o'clock on a chilly January evening the wide road was hectic with carriages and cabs, the gas-lit pavements thronged with men dressed like Hugh in white tie and tails, women in velvet cloaks.

When Hugh had left for America, Solly Greenbourne had been living with his father, Ben, in a vast house overlooking Green Park. Now Solly had a house of his own, just down the street from his father's and not much smaller. Hugh passed through an imposing doorway, and stopped to stare at the extravagant sweep of a black and orange marble staircase.

A butler and two footmen were in the hall. The butler took Hugh's hat, only to hand it to a footman; then the second footman led him up the staircase to a drawing room. Hugh was no expert on decoration but he immediately recognised the extravagant style of Louis XVI. Several other guests had arrived already and stood around drinking champagne and smoking cigarettes. This was new to Hugh: he had never seen people smoking in a drawing room. Solly caught his eye and came over. 'Pilaster, how nice of you to come! How are you, for goodness' sake?'

Solly was still fat and bespectacled, and there was already a stain on his white waistcoat, but he was jollier than ever.

'I'm very well, thanks, Greenbourne,' Hugh said.

'I know. I've been watching your progress in America. I hope the Pilasters are paying you a fortune—you deserve it.'

'And you've become a socialite, they say.'

'None of my doing. I got married, you know.' He tapped the bare shoulder of a short woman in an eggshell-green dress. She was facing the other way but her back was oddly familiar, and a feeling of *déjà vu* came over Hugh. Solly said to her, 'My dear, do you remember my old friend Hugh Pilaster?'

She turned slowly, like a door opening into the past, and Hugh's heart stopped as he saw her face.

'Of course I remember him,' she said. 'How are you, Mr Pilaster?'

Hugh stared, speechless, at the woman who had become Mrs Solomon Greenbourne. It was Maisie.

AUGUSTA SAT AT HER dressing table and put on the single row of pearls she always wore at dinner parties. Then she took from her open jewellery box the ring Strang had given her thirty years ago. It was in the form of a gold serpent with a diamond head and ruby eyes. She put it on her finger and, as she had done a thousand times before, brushed the raised head against her lips. She would never be the

Countess of Strang, she had accepted that years ago. But she was determined to have a title. And since Joseph did not have one she would have to get him one. She had brooded over the problem for years, and many sleepless nights of planning had gone into her strategy. Now the time was right. She would begin her campaign tonight, over dinner. Among her guests were three people who would play a crucial part in having Joseph made an earl.

He might take the title Earl of Whitehaven, she thought. Whitehaven was the port where the Pilaster family had begun in business, four generations ago. She imagined herself and Joseph entering a grand drawing room as a butler announced: 'The Earl and Countess of Whitehaven,' and the thought made her smile. She knew exactly what she had to do, but all the same she felt uneasy. Getting a peerage was not like buying a carpet—you could not go to the supplier and say, 'I want that one, how much is it?' She would need to be very sure-footed. If she had misjudged her people she was doomed.

A parlour maid knocked and said, 'Mr Hobbes has arrived, madam.'

She put Strang's ring away, got up from her dressing table, and went through the communicating door into Joseph's room. He was dressed for dinner. 'Stay up here a few more minutes, if you like,' she said to him. 'Only Arnold Hobbes has arrived.'

'Very well, if you don't mind,' he said.

It would suit her to have Hobbes alone for a while.

Hobbes was the editor of a political journal called *The Forum*. It generally sided with the Conservatives, who stood for the aristocracy and the established Church, and against the Liberals, the party of businessmen and Methodists. The Pilasters were both businessmen and Methodists, but the Conservatives were in power. Hobbes was in a curious position. He was powerful, because his journal was widely read; yet he was poor, for he did not make much money out of it. The combination was perfectly suited to Augusta's purpose. He had the power to help her and he might be bought.

He stood up eagerly to greet her. He was a nervous, quick-witted man, birdlike in his movements. Augusta led him to the window seat, to give their conversation a feeling of intimacy.

'Tell me what mischief you have been at today,' she said playfully. 'Trouncing Mr Gladstone? Undermining our India policy?'

He peered at her through smeared spectacles. 'I've been writing about the City of Glasgow Bank,' he said.

Augusta frowned. 'This is the bank that failed a while ago.'

'Exactly. Many of the Scottish trade unions have been ruined.'



'I seem to remember hearing talk of it,' she said. 'My husband said the City of Glasgow had been known for years to be unsound.'

'I don't understand this,' he said excitedly. 'People know a bank is no good, yet it is allowed to continue in business until it crashes, and thousands of people lose their life savings!'

Augusta did not understand it either. But she saw a chance to lead the conversation in the direction she wanted. 'Perhaps the worlds of commerce and government are too widely separated,' she said.

'It must be so. Better communication between businessmen and statesmen might prevent such catastrophes.'

'I wonder . . . ' Augusta hesitated as if considering an idea that had just struck her. 'I wonder whether someone such as yourself would consider becoming a director of one or two companies?'

He was surprised. 'Indeed, I might.'

'Some first-hand experience in a business enterprise might help you when you write on the world of commerce.'

'I've no doubt it would.'

'The rewards are not great—a hundred or two a year.' His eyes lit up: that was a lot of money to him. 'But the obligations are small. My husband could arrange it, if you were interested. Do think it over and tell me if you would like me to mention it.'

'Very well, I shall,' he said, working hard to conceal his excitement.

So far, so good, Augusta thought. Now she had to get him on the hook. She said thoughtfully, 'And the world of commerce should reciprocate, of course. More businessmen should serve their country in the House of Lords, I feel.'

His eyes narrowed, and she guessed that his quick mind was beginning to understand the bargain he was being offered. She developed her theme. 'Both Houses of Parliament would benefit from the knowledge of senior businessmen. Yet there is a curious prejudice against a businessman's being elevated to the peerage.'

'There is, and it is quite irrational,' Hobbes admitted. 'Our merchants and bankers are much more responsible for the nation's prosperity than landowners and clergymen, yet it is the latter who are ennobled for their services to the nation.'

'You should write an article about the question.' She gave him her warmest smile. Her cards were on the table now. He could hardly fail to see that this was the price he had to pay for the company directorships she was offering.

There was a long pause, then he said, 'Perhaps we should take this up. Closer links between commerce and government.'

'Peerages for businessmen,' Augusta said.

'And company directorships for journalists,' he added.

Augusta sensed that they had gone as far as they could in the direction of frankness. She was about to change the subject when more guests arrived and she was saved the trouble.

The rest of the party arrived in a bunch, and Joseph appeared at the same time. A few moments later Hasteed came in and said, 'Dinner is served, sir.'

Tonight Augusta had arranged for Edward to walk into dinner with Emily Maple, a shy, pretty girl of nineteen who was with her father, a Methodist minister, and her mother. They were plainly overwhelmed by the house and the company, and hardly fitted in, but Augusta was getting desperate in her search for a suitable bride for Edward. The boy was now twenty-nine years old and he had never shown a spark of interest in any eligible girl. The trouble was, Edward enjoyed his life with his male friends, going to his club and so on, and settling down to married life had no appeal. Augusta would have to put pressure on him.

On her left at the table Augusta had placed Michael Fortescue, a personable young man with political aspirations. He was said to be close to the Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli. Fortescue was the second of the three people Augusta needed to help her get Joseph a peerage. He was not as clever as Hobbes but he was more sophisticated and self-assured. She had been able to overawe Hobbes, she would have to seduce Fortescue. Mr Maple said grace. As the consommé was served she smiled warmly at Fortescue and said in a low, intimate voice, 'When are we going to see you in Parliament?'

'I wish I knew,' he said.

'Everyone speaks of you as brilliant, as you must know.'

He was embarrassed by her flattery. 'I'm not sure I do know.'

'You shouldn't wait for a general election,' she went on. 'Why don't you stand in a by-election?'

'You're very kind—but by-elections are expensive, Mrs Pilaster, and I am not a wealthy man.'

'I didn't know that,' she lied. 'You should find a sponsor, then.'

'A banker, perhaps?' he said in a half-playful, half-wistful tone.

'It's not impossible. Mr Pilaster is keen to take a more active part in government. And he often finds himself more in agreement with Conservatives.'

Her confidential tone encouraged him, as she intended, and now he said, 'In what way would Mr Pilaster like to serve the nation—other than by sponsoring a by-election candidate?'

Augusta matched his frankness. 'Perhaps in the House of Lords.'

Do you think it is possible?" She was enjoying this—and so was he.

'Possible? Certainly. Likely is another question. Shall I enquire?'

'Could you do so discreetly?'

He hesitated. 'I believe I could.'

'It would be most kind,' she said with satisfaction. 'And if a suitable by-election should be called . . .'

'You're very good.'

She touched his arm. 'I believe we understand one another perfectly,' she murmured. She held his arm a moment longer, looking into his eyes; then she turned away.

She was feeling good. She had dealt successfully with two of the three key people and she had not yet slipped. Throughout the next course she talked to Lord Morte, who was sitting on her right. With him she made polite conversation: it was his wife she wanted to influence and for that she had to wait until after dinner.

The men stayed in the dining room to smoke and Augusta took the ladies upstairs to her bedroom. There she got Lady Morte alone for a few minutes. Fifteen years older than Augusta, Harriet Morte was a lady in waiting to Queen Victoria. She had iron-grey hair and a most superior manner. Like Arnold Hobbes and Michael Fortescue, she had influence; and Augusta hoped that, like them, she would be corruptible. Lord and Lady Morte had plenty of money, but they spent more than they had.

Augusta was more nervous about Lady Morte than she had been about the men. Women were more difficult. They knew when they were being manipulated. She began by saying, 'Mr Pilaster and I are such admirers of the dear Queen.'

Lady Morte nodded, as if to say, 'Of course.' However, there was no *of course* about it: Queen Victoria was disliked by much of the nation for being remote and inflexible. Augusta went on, 'If ever we could help you with your noble duties, we would be thrilled.'

'How very kind, but what could you possibly do?'

'What do bankers do? They lend.' Augusta lowered her voice. 'Court life must be cripplingly expensive, I imagine.'

Lady Morte stiffened. There was a taboo on talking about money in her class and Augusta was breaking it flagrantly. But Augusta ploughed on. 'If you were to open an account with Pilasters, there would never be problems in that area . . .'

Lady Morte was offended, but on the other hand she was being offered unlimited credit at one of the largest banks in the world. Her instincts told her to snub Augusta, but greed held her back.

Augusta did not give her time to think about it. 'Please forgive my

being so candid,' she said. 'It comes only from a wish to be of service.' Lady Morte would not believe that, but she would assume Augusta simply wanted to curry favour with royalty. She would not look for a more specific motive, and Augusta would give her no more clues tonight. If she had assessed the woman correctly, Lady Morte would be hopelessly in debt to Pilasters Bank within six months. Then she would find out what Augusta wanted from her.

KINGSBRIDGE MANOR WAS one of the largest houses in England. Maisie had stayed there three or four times and she still had not seen half of it. The house had twenty principal bedrooms, not counting the rooms of the fifty or so servants. The young Duke of Kingsbridge had owned a hundred thousand acres of Wiltshire farmland. On Solly's advice he had sold half of it and bought a big chunk of South Kensington with the proceeds. The agricultural depression that had impoverished many great families had left 'Kingo' untouched, and he was still able to entertain his friends in the grand style.

The Prince of Wales had been with them for the first week. Solly and Kingo and the prince shared a taste for boisterous fun, and Maisie had helped to provide it. She had substituted soapsuds for whipped cream on Kingo's dessert, and she had glued together the pages of *The Times* so that it could not be opened. By hazard the prince himself had been the first to pick up the newspaper, and as he fumbled with the pages there had been a moment of suspense when everyone wondered how he would take it—for though the heir to the throne loved practical jokes, he was never the victim—but he began to chuckle as he realised what had happened, and the others all laughed uproariously, from relief as much as amusement.

The prince had left, and Hugh Pilaster had arrived; and then the trouble had started.

It was Solly's idea to get Hugh invited here, but Maisie did not want to see him. She did not want the past brought back. Solly was a good husband and she could not bear the thought of hurting him. And there was Bertie, her reason for living.

Their child was named Hubert, but they called him Bertie, which was also the name of the Prince of Wales. Bertie would be five years old on May 1, but that was a secret: his birthday was celebrated in September, to hide the fact that he had been born only six months after the wedding. Solly's family knew the truth, but no one else did: Bertie had been born in Switzerland, during the world tour that had been their honeymoon. Since then Maisie had been happy.

Solly's parents had not welcomed Maisie. They were German Jews

who had been living in England for generations, and they looked down on Yiddish-speaking Russian Jews just off the boat. The fact that she was carrying another man's child gave them an excuse for rejecting her. But Solly loved her, and he loved Bertie too, although he did not know whose child he was; and that was enough for Maisie—until Hugh came back.

She got up early, as always, and went along to the nursery wing. Bertie was having breakfast in the nursery dining room with Kingo's children, Anne and Alfred, supervised by three nurserymaids. She kissed his sticky face and said, 'What are you having?'

'Porridge with honey.' He spoke with the drawling accent of the upper classes, an accent Maisie had been at pains to learn, and from which she still occasionally slipped.

'I think I'll have some,' she said, sitting down.

Bertie did not take after Hugh. As a baby he had resembled Solly, for all babies looked like Solly; and now he was like Maisie's father, with dark hair and brown eyes. Maisie would have liked to have more children, but something had gone wrong inside her when Bertie was born and she could not conceive again. She was bitterly sorry for Solly, who would never have children of his own; although he said he already had more happiness than any man deserved.

Solly had eaten breakfast and was getting ready to go out when Maisie returned to their bedroom. She kissed him and helped him put on his ankle boots, for he could not bend down far enough to tie the laces himself. She put on a fur coat and hat and Solly donned a plaid Inverness coat with a cape and matching bowler hat, then they went down to meet the others.

It was a bright, frosty morning. Maisie walked with Kingo on one side of her and Solly on the other. Hugh was behind with Kingo's wife, the duchess, known to her friends as Liz. Although Maisie could not see him she could feel his presence. After about half a mile they came to the main gate, and Maisie saw a familiar tall, black-bearded figure approaching from the village. For a moment she imagined it was her papa; then she recognised her brother Danny.

Danny had returned to their home town six years ago to find that their parents no longer lived in the old house, and had left no other address. Disappointed, he travelled further north, to Glasgow, and founded the Working Men's Welfare Association, which not only insured working men against unemployment but also campaigned for safety rules in factories. His name started appearing in the newspapers. Papa read about him and came to his office, and there was a joyful reunion. It turned out that Papa and Mama had met other



Jews soon after Maisie and Danny ran away. They borrowed the money to move to Manchester, where Papa found another job. Mama survived her illness and was now quite healthy.

Maisie was married to Solly by the time the family was reunited. Solly would cheerfully have given Papa a house and an income for life, but Papa did not want to retire, and instead asked Solly to lend him the money to open a shop. Now Mama and Papa sold caviar and other delicacies to the wealthy citizens of Manchester.

Seeing Danny here at Kingsbridge, Maisie immediately feared something had happened to their parents, and she ran to him, her heart in her mouth, saying, 'Danny! What's wrong? Is it Mama?'

'Papa and Mama are fine,' he said in his American accent.

'Thank heavens. How did you know I was here?'

'You wrote to me.'

'Oh, yes.'

Danny looked like a Turkish warrior with his curly beard and flashing eyes, but he was dressed like a clerk, in a well-worn black suit and a bowler hat. Solly rose to the occasion with his usual social grace. He shook Danny's hand and said, 'How are you, Robinson? This is my friend the Duke of Kingsbridge. Kingo, allow me to present my brother-in-law Dan Robinson, General Secretary of the Working Men's Welfare Association.'

'How do you do, Duke?' Danny said with easy courtesy.

Then Solly said, 'And this is our friend Hugh Pilaster.'

Maisie tensed. Danny knew that Hugh was the father of Bertie. He had once wanted to break Hugh's neck. They had never met, but Danny had not forgotten. What would he do?

However, he was six years older now. He gave Hugh a cold look, but shook hands civilly. Hugh, who did not know he was a father and had no inkling of these undertones, spoke to Danny in a friendly way. 'Are you the brother who ran away from home?'

'I sure am.'

Solly said, 'Fancy Hugh knowing that!'

Maisie felt bewildered by the conversation: it was skating over the surface of too many secrets, and the ice was thin. She hastened to get back onto firm ground. 'Danny, why are you here?'

His weary face took on an expression of bitterness. 'I'm no longer the Secretary of the Working Men's Welfare Association,' he said. 'I'm ruined, for the third time in my life, by incompetent bankers.'

'Danny, please!' Maisie protested. He knew perfectly well that both Solly and Hugh were bankers.

But Hugh said, 'Don't worry! We hate incompetent bankers too.'

They're a menace to everyone. But what exactly has happened, Mr Robinson?

'I spent five years building up the association,' Danny said. 'We paid out hundreds of pounds every week in benefits and took in thousands in subscriptions. But what were we to do with the surplus?'

Solly said, 'I assume you put it aside for a bad year.'

'And where do you think we put it?'

'In a bank, I trust.'

'In the City of Glasgow Bank, to be exact.'

'Oh, dear,' said Solly.

Maisie said, 'I don't understand.'

Solly explained: 'The City of Glasgow Bank went bust.'

'Oh, no!' Maisie cried. It made her want to weep.

Danny nodded. 'All those shillings paid in by hard-working men — lost by fools in top hats. And you wonder why they talk about revolution.'

Maisie felt her brother was wounded, and she wanted to get him alone and do what she could to ease his pain. She took his arm. 'Come,' she said, 'I'll get you some lunch.'

AFTER DANNY LEFT for London, Maisie joined Solly for an afternoon nap.

Solly lay on the bed in a red silk bathrobe and watched her undress. 'I can't rescue Dan's welfare association,' he said. 'Even if it made financial sense to me—which it doesn't—I couldn't persuade the other partners.'

Maisie felt a surge of affection for him. She had not asked him to help Danny. 'You're such a good man,' she said. 'You've already done so much for my family, you never have to apologise. Besides, Danny won't take anything from you. He's too proud.'

'But what will he do?'

She stepped out of her petticoats. 'He wants to be a Member of Parliament.'

Solly rolled on his side and propped his head up on his elbow to get a better view of his wife. 'I wish I weren't leaving you tonight.'

Maisie wished the same. A part of her was excited at the prospect of being with Hugh when Solly was away, but that made her feel more guilty still. 'I don't mind,' she said.

'I feel so ashamed of my family.'

'You shouldn't.' It was Passover, and Solly was going to celebrate the ritual of Seder with his parents. Maisie was not invited. She understood Ben Greenbourne's dislike of her, and half felt she

deserved the way he treated her, but Solly was deeply upset by it.

'Are you sure you don't mind?' he said anxiously.

She sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over to kiss him. 'I'm sure,' she said.

THEY WERE ALWAYS EIGHTEEN or twenty around the long dinner table. Maisie loved to see the crisp linen and fine china, the hundreds of candles reflected in the shining glassware. She found herself seated next to Hugh.

Maisie chatted brightly to the men on either side of her. However, as the meal progressed she felt the presence of Hugh by her side more and more. She made an effort to talk at least as much to the man on her other side; but the past seemed to stand at her shoulder, waiting to be acknowledged. She and Hugh had never spoken of what had happened six years ago. All Hugh knew was that she had disappeared without a trace, only to surface as Mrs Solomon Greenbourne. Sooner or later she was going to have to give him some explanation, and perhaps this was a good time, when Solly was away.

A moment came when several people around them were talking noisily. Maisie decided she should speak now. She turned to Hugh, overcome with emotion. She began speaking three or four times and could not go on. Finally she managed to get a few words out. 'I would have ruined your career, you know.'

He understood right away what she was talking about. 'Who told you that you would have ruined my career?'

If he had been sympathetic she might have broken down, but luckily he was aggressive, and that enabled her to reply, 'Your aunt Augusta.'

'I suspected she was involved somehow.'

'But she was right.'

'I don't believe that,' he said, getting angry very quickly. 'You didn't ruin Solly's career.'

'Calm down. Solly wasn't already the black sheep of the family.'

'Why didn't you simply tell me what you were doing, and why?'

'I couldn't.' Remembering those awful days, she felt choked up again and had to take a deep breath to calm herself. 'It broke my heart to cut myself off like that. I couldn't have done it if I'd had to justify myself to you as well.'

Still he would not let her off the hook. 'You could have sent me a note.' He took a gulp of his wine. 'It was awful, not understanding, not knowing if you were even alive.' He was speaking harshly, but she could see the pain in his eyes.

'I'm sorry,' she said feebly. 'I didn't want to hurt you. I did it for love.' As soon as she heard herself say the word 'love' she regretted it.

He picked up on it. 'Do you love Solly now?' he said abruptly.

'Yes.'

'The two of you seem very settled.'

'The way we live . . . it isn't difficult to be contented.'

He had not finished being angry. 'You got what you wanted.'

That was a bit hard, but she felt that perhaps she deserved it, so she just nodded.

'What happened to April?'

Maisie hesitated. This was going a bit too far. 'You class me with April, then, do you?' she said, feeling hurt.

He smiled ruefully. 'No, you were never like April. All the same I'd like to know what became of her. Do you still see her?'

'Yes—discreetly.' April was a neutral topic: talking about her would get them off this dangerously emotional ground. 'Do you know a place called Nellie's?'

He lowered his voice. 'It's a brothel.'

'Well, April owns it.'

'Goodness! How did that happen?'

'First she became the mistress of a novelist and lived in a cottage in Clapham. He tired of her at about the time Nell was thinking about retirement. So April sold the cottage and bought Nell out.'

'Fancy that,' said Hugh.

The table had suddenly gone quiet, and his words were heard by several people nearby. Someone said, 'Fancy what?' Hugh just grinned and made no reply.

After that they stayed off dangerous topics, but Maisie felt subdued and somewhat fragile, as if she had suffered a fall and bruised herself.

When dinner was over Kingo announced that he wanted to dance. The drawing-room carpet was rolled up and a footman who could play polkas on the piano was summoned.

Maisie danced with everyone except Hugh, then it was obvious she was avoiding him, so she danced with him; and it was as if six years had rolled back and they were in Cremorne Gardens again. He hardly led her: they seemed instinctively to do the same thing. After Hugh she took another partner; but then the other men stopped asking her. As ten o'clock turned to eleven and the brandy appeared, convention was abandoned: some of the women kicked off their shoes, and Maisie danced every dance with Hugh.

When the piano-playing footman was exhausted, the duchess demanded a breath of air, and maids were sent scurrying for coats so





they could all take a turn round the garden. Out in the darkness, Maisie took Hugh's arm. 'In Boston . . . was there a girl you liked?'

'I tried, Maisie,' he said.

Suddenly she wished she had not asked him this, but it was too late.

'There were pretty girls in Boston, intelligent girls, and girls who would make wonderful wives and mothers. I paid attention to some of them, and they seemed to like me. But each time what I felt was not enough. It was not what I felt for you. It wasn't love.'

Now he had said it. 'Stop,' Maisie whispered.

'Two or three mothers got rather cross with me, then my reputation spread around, and the girls became wary. They knew there was something wrong with me, I wasn't serious, not the marrying kind. Hugh Pilaster, the English banker and breaker of hearts. And if a girl did seem to fall for me, despite my record, I would discourage her. I don't like to break people's hearts. I know too well what it feels like.'

Her face was wet with tears, and she was glad of the tactful dark. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

'Anyway, I know what's wrong with me now. I guess I always knew, but the last two days have removed any doubts.'

They had fallen behind, and now he stopped and faced her.

She said, 'Don't say it, Hugh, please.'

'I still love you. That's all.'

It was out, and everything was ruined.

'I think you love me too,' he went on mercilessly. 'Don't you?'

She looked up at him. She could see, reflected in his eyes, the lights of the house across the lawn, but his face was in shadow. He inclined his head and kissed her lips, and she did not turn away. 'Salt tears,' he said after a minute. 'You do love me. I knew it.' He took a folded handkerchief from his pocket and touched her face gently, mopping the teardrops from her cheeks.

She had to put a stop to this. 'We must catch up with the others,' she said. 'People will talk.' She turned and began to walk, so that he had to either release her arm or go with her. He went with her.

'I'm surprised that you worry about people talking,' he said. 'Your set is famous for not minding anything of that sort.'

She was obscurely bothered by Hugh's saying that the Marlborough Set was famous for its tolerance. It was true, but she wished he hadn't used the phrase 'anything of that sort'; she was not sure why.

When they re-entered the house the tall clock in the hall was striking midnight. Maisie suddenly felt drained by the tensions of the day. 'I'm going to bed,' she announced. She saw the duchess look reflectively at Hugh, then back at her, and suppress a little smile; and

she realised they all thought Hugh would sleep with her tonight. The ladies went upstairs together, leaving the men to drink a nightcap.

Maisie went into her bedroom and closed the door. A coal fire burned merrily in the grate and there were candles on the mantelpiece. They might all be wrong: perhaps Hugh would not come to her tonight. The thought stabbed her like a pain, and she longed for him to come.

After a while she heard the men coming up the stairs, heavy-footed and laughing at some joke. Hugh had been right: not one of them would be shocked by a little adultery at a country-house party. Did they not feel disloyal to their friend Solly? she thought derisively. And then it hit her like a slap in the face that she was the one who ought to feel disloyal.

On impulse she went to the door and locked it.

She understood now why she had disliked Hugh's saying, 'Your set is famous for not minding anything of that sort.' It made her feeling for Hugh seem commonplace, just another one of the many infidelities to gossip about. Solly deserved better than to be betrayed by a commonplace affair. But I want Hugh, she thought. The idea of forgoing this night with him made her want to weep.

There was a soft tap at the door. The handle turned and the door was pushed, but of course it would not open.

'Maisie!' a voice called softly. 'It's me, Hugh. Let me in?'

She leaned her back against the wall, and the tears streamed down her face.

'Say *something*. Are you there? I know you're there.'

She stood still, crying silently.

After a while he went away.

THE CORDOVAN MINISTRY WAS busy. Tomorrow was Cordovan Independence Day and there would be a big afternoon reception for Members of Parliament, diplomats and journalists. But when Edward Pilaster arrived, Micky Miranda dropped everything, for what he had to say to Edward was much more important than the reception. He needed half a million pounds, and he was hoping to get the money from Edward.

Micky brought Edward into the minister's chamber, and spread out a map of Cordova on the table. 'Here is Santamaria Province, in the north of the country,' he began.

'I do know the geography of Cordova,' Edward said peevishly.

'Of course you do,' said Micky in a soothing voice. It was true. Pilasters Bank did a healthy volume of business with Cordova,

financing its exports of nitrate, salt beef and silver and its imports of mining equipment and guns. Edward handled all that business, thanks to Micky. In consequence Edward was now seen as the leading London expert on Cordova. 'Of course you do,' Micky repeated. 'And you know that all the nitrate mined by my father has to be transported by mule train to Palma. But what you may not know is that it is possible to build a railroad along that route.' Micky took a bound volume from his desk. 'The details are in here. Take a look.'

'How much?' Edward said.

'Five hundred thousand pounds.'

Edward rifled through the report. 'What about politics?'

Micky glanced up at the big portrait of President Garcia in the uniform of commander in chief. 'The President favours the idea.' Garcia trusted Papa. Since Papa had become Governor of Santa-maria Province—with the help of two thousand Westley-Richards rifles—the Miranda family had been the President's close allies. Garcia did not suspect Papa's motive for wanting a railway to Palma: it would enable the Mirandas to attack the capital within two days instead of two weeks.

'How will it be paid for?' said Edward.

'We'll raise the money on the London market,' Micky said. 'I thought Pilasters Bank might like the business.'

Edward shook his head and said, 'I don't think so.'

Micky was dismayed.

'Cordova isn't the same as Canada or Russia,' Edward went on. 'Investors don't like your political set-up, with every provincial *caudillo* having his own personal army. It's medieval.'

Micky fought down panic, but his emotions must have shown, for Edward said, 'I say, old boy, is it terribly important? You look upset.'

'To tell you the truth, it would mean quite a lot to my family,' Micky admitted. 'Surely, if Pilasters were to back the project, people would conclude that Cordova must be a good place to invest.'

'There's something in that,' Edward said. 'If one of the partners put the idea up and really wanted to push it through, it could probably be done. But I'm not a partner.'

Micky realised he had underestimated the difficulty of raising half a million pounds. But he was not beaten. He would find a way.

That night Micky and the Pilasters went to see *HMS Pinafore* at the Opéra Comique. Micky got there a few minutes early and ran into the Bodwin family, who were Pilaster hangers-on. Rachel Bodwin, approaching thirty and still single, was attracted to Micky, but then so was almost everyone. The Pilasters arrived and Micky turned his

attention to Augusta. She was wearing a striking evening gown in deep raspberry-pink. 'You look . . . delicious, Mrs Pilaster,' he said in a low voice, and she smiled with pleasure. Then it was time to take their seats.

Micky worried over his railroad loan throughout the first act. It had not occurred to him that Cordova's primitive political set-up might be seen by investors as risky. That probably meant he could not get the railroad project financed by any other bank. The only way to raise the money would be to use his inside influence with Pilasters. And the only people he might be able to influence were Edward and Augusta. During the first interval he found himself alone in the box with Augusta and he tackled her immediately.

'When will Edward be made a partner in the bank?'

'My husband has promised to make Edward a partner as soon as he marries,' Augusta said.

Micky was surprised. Edward, marry! The idea was startling.

'We have even agreed on a bride: Emily Maple, the daughter of Deacon Maple. She's pretty, young—only nineteen—and sensible.'

'So what obstacle is there?'

Augusta frowned. 'Somehow Edward never gets round to asking her. I have a funny feeling he might go ahead if you were married.'

Micky looked away. That was perceptive of her. 'Me, marry?' he said with a little laugh. Naturally he would marry, sooner or later, but he saw no reason to do so yet. However, if it was the price of financing the railroad . . .

I will, then. So be it, Micky thought.

During the second interval Micky said to Augusta, 'Edward needs a clever clerk to look after his interests at the bank.'

Augusta thought for a moment. 'That's a very good notion indeed,' she said. 'Someone you and I know and trust.'

'Exactly.'

Augusta said, 'Do you have someone in mind?'

'I have a cousin working for me at the ministry, Simon Oliver. It was Olivera but he Anglicised it. He's completely trustworthy.'

'Bring him to tea,' Augusta said. 'If I like him I'll speak to Joseph.'

As the last act began, Micky thought about Augusta. We are alike, he mused. It was Micky Augusta should be married to: together they could conquer the world. He pushed that fantastic notion out of his head. No, he needed a girl of modest background, one who liked him already and would accept him with alacrity. His eye roamed idly round the stalls of the theatre—and lit on Rachel Bodwin.

She fitted the bill perfectly, he realised.

AN HOUR LATER, Micky and Edward were eating supper in a private room at Nellie's. April Tilsley had redecorated this room with fashionable William Morris fabrics, but already the wallpaper was torn and the carpet ripped. However, low candlelight hid the tawdriness of the room.

The men were being waited on by two of their favourite girls, Muriel and Lily, who were wearing red silk shoes and elaborate hats. The peaceful atmosphere relaxed Micky.

When they finished eating he poured another glass of wine and said, 'I'm going to marry Rachel Bodwin.'

Muriel and Lily giggled.

Edward stared at him for a long moment, then said, 'You're a damned swine, Miranda.'

'What the devil has got into you?' Micky asked. 'Aren't you going to marry Emily Maple?'

'After all these years!' Edward raged. 'After all I've done for you!'

Baffled by Edward's fury, Micky realised he had to calm him down. 'It's not going to make any difference to us,' he said in a reasonable tone. 'We'll still come here.'

Edward looked suspicious. In a quieter voice he said, 'Don't wives mind that?'

Micky shrugged. 'Who cares whether they mind?'

Muriel put her arms round Edward's neck. 'It'll be just the same when you're married, Edward, I promise.'

'So nothing will change, really,' he said, looking at Micky.

'Oh, yes,' said Micky. 'One thing will change. You'll be a partner in the bank.'

## APRIL

The music hall was as hot as a Turkish bath. The air smelt of beer and shellfish. On stage a woman in rags was holding a doll, to represent a newborn baby, and singing about how she had been abandoned. The audience, sitting on benches at long trestle tables, linked arms and joined in the chorus: 'And all it took was a little drop of gin!'

Hugh sang at the top of his voice. He was feeling good. He had eaten a pint of winkles and drunk several glasses of warm beer, and he was pressed up against Nora Dempster. She had a soft, plump body and a beguiling smile, and she had probably saved his life.



After his visit to Kingsbridge Manor he had fallen into a black depression. He had been able to live through the daytime, for work took his mind off his grief: he was busy organising the joint enterprise with Madler and Bell, which the Pilasters partners had finally approved. And he was soon to become a partner himself. But in the evenings he had no enthusiasm for anything. He sat in his room thinking about Maisie, or walked the streets hoping to bump into her.

Instead he had bumped into Nora. She had been coming out of Peter Robinson's in Oxford Street—a shop that had once been a linen draper's but was now called a 'department store'—when she stumbled and he caught her in his arms. Even though she was wrapped up, her body was soft and yielding. Then she dropped her purchase, a pottery vase, and it smashed on the pavement. She gave a cry of dismay and Hugh naturally insisted on buying a replacement.

She had a pretty round face with sandy-blonde curls poking out from a bonnet, and her clothes were cheap but pleasing: a pink wool dress embroidered with flowers and worn over a bustle, and a tight-fitting French navy velvet jacket trimmed with rabbit fur. She spoke with a broad cockney drawl.

After buying the replacement vase, Hugh insisted on taking her home in a hansom. She lived with her father, a travelling salesman of patent medicines. Her mother was dead. The neighbourhood was rather less respectable than he had guessed, poor working class rather than middle class.

He assumed he would never see her again, and all day Sunday at his mother's in Folkestone, he brooded about Maisie as always. On Monday at the bank he got a note from Nora, thanking him for his kindness. Her handwriting was small and neat, he noticed, before dropping the note into the wastepaper basket.

Next day he stepped out of the bank at midday, and saw her walking along the street towards him. He doffed his hat and she stopped to talk. She worked as an assistant to a corset maker, she told him with a blush, and she was on her way back to the shop after visiting a client. A sudden impulse made him ask her to go dancing with him that night. She said she would like to go but she did not have a respectable hat, so he took her to a milliner's shop and bought her one, and that settled the matter.

Much of their romance was conducted while shopping. She had never owned much and she took unashamed delight in Hugh's affluence. For his part he enjoyed buying her anything she wanted. His sister Dorothy, with all the wisdom of her twelve years, had announced that Nora only liked him for his money. He had laughed

and said, 'But who would love me for my looks?' In a few weeks Nora gave him back his *joie de vivre*.

When the music-hall show ended they went outside into a thick fog tasting of soot. They wrapped scarves round their necks and over their mouths and set off for Nora's home in Camden Town.

It was like being underwater. All sound was muffled, and people and things loomed out of the fog without warning: a drunk staggering out of a pub, a policeman on patrol, a dog. Hugh and Nora held hands and stopped every now and again in the thickest darkness to pull down their scarves and kiss. Nora's lips were soft and responsive, and the fog made everything hushed and romantic. Hugh had not felt so good for years. He realised he had been alone too long. Maisie was thoroughly settled with Solly, she would never be his. It was time he had someone warm to share his bed and his life. Why not Nora?

He took her hand. 'Nora, will you marry me?'

She flushed red. 'Yes, I will.'

He kissed her. She kissed him back passionately.

THE DUCHESS OF TENBIGH'S costume ball was the first great event of the 1879 London season. Everyone was talking about it, and people would go to any length to get an invitation.

Augusta and Joseph Pilaster were not invited. That was hardly surprising: they did not belong in the very highest echelon of London society. As soon as Augusta heard about the ball she mentioned it to Harriet Morte. As a lady in waiting to the Queen, Lady Morte had great social power, but she did not offer to get Augusta invited.

Augusta checked Lord Morte's account with Pilasters Bank and found that he had an overdraft of a thousand pounds. The next day he got a note asking him when he hoped to regularise the account. Augusta called on Lady Morte the same day. She apologised, saying that the note had been an error. Then she mentioned the ball again.

Lady Morte's normally impassive face was momentarily animated by a glare of hatred as she understood the bargain that was being offered: she must exert her influence to get Augusta invited to the ball, or find a thousand pounds to pay off her overdraft. She took the easier option, and the invitations arrived the following day.

Augusta was going as Queen Elizabeth and Joseph as the Earl of Leicester. On the night of the ball they had dinner at home and changed afterwards. When she was dressed Augusta went into Joseph's room to help him with his costume.

She was incensed that Hugh was to be made a partner at the same time as Edward. Their promotion was to take place at the end of

April, but earlier in the month, to Augusta's delight, Hugh made the unbelievably foolish mistake of marrying a plump little working-class girl from Camden Town.

As Augusta adjusted Joseph's Elizabethan ruff she said, 'I presume you'll have to think again about Hugh's being made a partner, now that he's married a housemaid?'

'She's not a housemaid, she's a corsetière. Or was. Now she's Mrs Pilaster.'

'All the same, a partner can hardly have a shopgirl as a wife.'

'I don't see the problem.' He hesitated, then added, 'I sometimes think you forget your own background, my dear.'

Augusta was outraged. 'I never worked in my father's shops,' she said. 'I was brought up to be a lady.'

'I apologise. Let's say no more about it. It's time to go.'

Augusta clamped her mouth shut but inside she was seething.

Edward and Emily were waiting for them in the hall, dressed as Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Emily had big blue eyes and the pretty face of a little girl, but Augusta had discovered that she was not as timid as she looked. Since the wedding Edward had been bad-tempered, and Augusta suspected there was something wrong. However, the important thing was that he was married and a partner in the bank. He was settled. Everything else could be worked out.

The ball began at half past ten and the Pilasters arrived on time. There was already a queue from the hall up the curving staircase to the landing where the Duke and Duchess of Tenbigh, dressed as Solomon and Sheba, were greeting their guests. The hall was a mass of flowers and a band played to entertain them while they waited.

The Pilasters were followed in by Micky Miranda—invited because of his diplomatic status—and his new wife Rachel. Micky looked more dashing than ever in the red silk of a Cardinal Wolsey outfit.

Up ahead of them Augusta spotted another pair of newlyweds, Hugh and Nora. He was dressed as an Indian rajah and Nora seemed to have come as a snake charmer, in a sequinned gown cut away to reveal harem trousers. Artificial snakes were wound round her arms and legs. Augusta shuddered. 'Hugh's wife really is impossibly vulgar,' she murmured to Joseph. 'She's not fit to be the wife of a partner in Pilasters Bank.'

'Nora won't have to make any financial decisions.'

Augusta could have screamed with frustration. Evidently it was not enough that Nora was a working-class girl. She would have to do something unforgivable before Joseph would turn against Hugh.

Now there was a thought. Perhaps there was a way she could get

Nora into trouble. She looked up the stairs again and studied her prey. Nora and Hugh were talking to the Hungarian attaché, Count de Tokoly, a man of doubtful morals who was appropriately dressed as Henry VIII. Nora was just the kind of girl the count would be charmed by, Augusta thought biliously. Respectable ladies would cross the room to avoid speaking to him, but all the same he had to be invited everywhere because he was a senior diplomat. 'Nora is talking to de Tokoly,' Augusta murmured to Joseph. 'She had better take care of her reputation.'

'Now, don't you be rude to him,' Joseph replied brusquely. 'We're hoping to raise two million pounds for his government.'

Augusta continued to brood about Nora. The girl was most vulnerable now, when everything was unfamiliar and she had not had time to learn upper-class manners. If she could be brought to disgrace herself tonight, preferably in front of the Prince of Wales . . .

Just as she was thinking about the prince, the royal party arrived. The band stopped abruptly in the middle of a Strauss waltz and struck up the national anthem. All the guests in the hall bowed and curtsied, and the queue on the staircase dipped like a wave as the prince and Princess Alexandra, dressed as King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, came up. The prince was getting fatter every year, Augusta thought as she curtsied to him. She felt sorry for the pretty princess, who had to put up with a spendthrift, philandering husband.

At the top of the stairs, the duke and duchess welcomed their royal guests and ushered them into the ballroom, where masses of flowers were banked up all round the walls, and the light from a thousand candles glittered back from the tall mirrors between the windows. The prince and princess moved to a dais at the end of the room. It had been arranged that some of the more spectacular costumes should pass in front of the royal party in procession, and as soon as the royals were seated the first group came in from the salon. A crush formed near the dais, and Augusta found herself shoulder to shoulder with Count de Tokoly.

'What a delightful girl your nephew's wife is, Mrs Pilaster,' he said. She gave him a frosty smile. 'You are generous to say so, Count.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Do I detect a note of dissent? No doubt you would have preferred Hugh to choose a bride from his own class.'

'You know the answer to that without my telling you.'

'But her charm is irresistible. I shall ask her to dance later on.'

Augusta was suddenly inspired. The count and Nora—the combination could be explosive. She looked round, spotted Micky, and went over to him. 'I want you to do something for me,' she said.

Micky gave her a knowing look. 'Anything,' he murmured. She ignored the innuendo. 'Do you know Count de Tokoly?' 'Indeed. All we diplomats know one another.'

'Tell him that Nora is no better than she ought to be.'

Micky's mouth curled in a half-smile. 'Just that?'

'You may elaborate if you wish.'

'Should I hint that I know this from, say, personal experience?'

She nodded. 'Even better.'

'You know what he will do?' Micky said.

'I trust he will make an indecent suggestion to her.'

Micky nodded. 'I am your slave, in this as in all things.'

Augusta waved the compliment aside impatiently: she was too tense to listen to facetious gallantry. She looked for Nora and saw her staring around in wonderment at the lavish decor: the girl had never seen anything like this in her life. Augusta made her way through the crowd to Nora's side, and spoke into her ear. 'A word of advice.'

'Much obliged for it, I'm sure,' Nora said.

Augusta said, 'I noticed you talking to Count de Tokoly.'

'A dirty old man,' Nora said immediately.

Augusta winced at her vulgarity but pressed on. 'Be careful of him.'

'Be careful?' Nora said. 'What do you mean, exactly?'

'Don't let him take any liberties. If he is not set straight immediately he can be very embarrassing.'

Nora nodded. 'Don't worry, I know how to deal with his type.'

Augusta turned away to watch the procession. She had done her work: the seeds were planted. Passing in front of the prince were some of the Marlborough Set, including Solly and Maisie Greenbourne. They were dressed as eastern potentates, and instead of bowing and curtsying they knelt and salaamed, which drew a laugh from the portly prince and a round of applause from the crowd.

The procession ended. The band struck up a waltz. The prince led the duchess onto the floor, and the duke took the princess. Others rapidly followed suit, and suddenly Micky was at Augusta's side, asking her for the pleasure.

As soon as she was in his arms she felt charged. It was like being seventeen again, and dancing with Strang. She felt young and beautiful and carefree. Momentarily she recalled the scene in old Seth's bedroom six years ago, but it seemed unreal, like a dream. She could not quite believe it had actually happened.

'Look over there,' Micky said.

She followed the direction of his nod and saw Nora dancing with Count de Tokoly. 'Did you speak to him?'



'I did.'

She tensed. 'Let's get closer,' she said.

It was not easy, for the royal group was in that corner, and everyone was trying to be near them; but Micky skilfully steered her through the crush. So far, Nora and the count looked like any other dancing couple. As the orchestra played on, Augusta wondered whether she had misjudged her victims. She was ready to give up hope when the explosion came.

Augusta was the only person to see how it started. The count put his lips close to Nora's ear and spoke. She stopped dancing abruptly and pushed him away. The count spoke again, his face creasing with a lascivious grin. At that second the music stopped, and in the momentary silence that followed, Nora slapped him.

The smack sounded throughout the ballroom like a gunshot. It was not a polite ladylike slap, designed for drawing-room use, but the kind of blow that would deter a drunken groper in a saloon bar. The count staggered back—and bumped into the Prince of Wales.

There was a collective gasp from the people around. The prince stumbled and was caught by the Duke of Tenbigh. In the horrified silence, Nora's cockney accent rang out loud and clear: 'Don't you ever come near me again, you filthy old reprobate!'

For another second they formed a still tableau: the outraged woman, the humiliated count and the startled prince. Then Hugh appeared at Nora's side and took her arm; the count drew himself up to his full height and stalked out; and an anxious group clustered protectively round the prince.

Augusta looked triumphantly at Micky.

'Brilliant,' he murmured with real admiration. 'You're brilliant, Augusta.' He squeezed her arm and led her off the dance floor.

Her husband was waiting for her. 'That wretched girl!' he expostulated. 'She's brought disgrace on the whole family, and doubtless lost us a major contract too!'

It was just the reaction Augusta had hoped for. 'Now perhaps you'll believe that Hugh can't be made a partner,' she said triumphantly.

Joseph gave her an appraising stare. For one dreadful moment she feared he had guessed that she had orchestrated the whole incident. But he said, 'You're right, my dear. You've been right all along.'

Hugh was steering Nora to the door. Augusta did not want them to go immediately. There was a danger that tomorrow when people cooled off they might say the incident was not as bad as it had seemed. Augusta wanted more of a row now: angry words that could

not easily be forgotten. She put a detaining hand on Nora's arm. 'I warned you about Count de Tokoly,' she said accusingly.

Hugh said, 'When such a man insults a lady on the dance floor, there isn't much she can do other than cause a scene.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Augusta snapped. 'Any well-bred young girl would have said she felt unwell and sent for her carriage.'

Hugh did not deny this, and again Augusta worried that the incident would fizzle out. But Joseph said to Hugh, 'Heaven knows the damage you've done to the family and the bank tonight.'

Hugh coloured. 'What precisely do you mean?' he said stiffly.

'We've certainly lost the Hungarian account, and we'll never again be invited to a royal event.'

'I know that perfectly well,' Hugh said. 'I meant to ask why you said the damage has been done by *me*?'

'Because it's your wife who doesn't know how to behave!'

Better and better, Augusta thought with malicious glee.

Hugh spoke with controlled fury. 'Let me get this straight. A Pilaster wife must suffer insult rather than jeopardise a business deal, is that your philosophy?'

Joseph was mightily offended. 'You insolent young pup,' he raged. 'What I'm saying is that by marrying beneath yourself you have disqualified yourself from ever becoming a partner in the bank!'

He said it! Augusta thought jubilantly. He said it!

Hugh was jolted into silence. Unlike Augusta he had not thought ahead. Now the significance of what had happened was sinking in, and she watched his expression change from rage to despair.

'So that's it,' Hugh said at last, and he was looking at Augusta rather than Joseph. To her surprise she saw that he was close to tears. 'Very well, Augusta. You win. I don't know how it was done but I've no doubt you provoked this incident.' He turned to Joseph. 'But you ought to reflect on it, Uncle Joseph. You should think about who genuinely cares about the bank . . .' He looked again at Augusta. 'And who are its real enemies.'

THE NEWS OF HUGH'S FALL spread round the City. By the following afternoon, people who had clamoured to see him with moneymaking schemes for railways, shipyards and suburban housing were cancelling their appointments. Within the partners' room there was a row. Uncle Samuel had been indignant when Joseph announced that Hugh could not be made a partner. However, Young William had sided with his brother Joseph, and Major Hartshorn did the same, so Samuel was outvoted.

Hugh's resentment grew inside him like an ulcer, but he now had a wife, a new house and six servants to support, so he had to stay on at the bank. On the second Monday after the Duchess of Tenbigh's ball, in the telegraph office on the ground floor, he met a stranger, a dark-haired man of about twenty-one. Hugh smiled and said, 'Hello, who are you?'

'Simon Oliver,' the man said in a vaguely Spanish accent.

Hugh stuck out his hand. 'I'm Hugh Pilaster.'

'How do you do,' Oliver said. He seemed rather sulky.

'I work on North American loans,' Hugh said. 'What about you?'

'I'm clerk to Mr Edward.'

Hugh made a connection. 'Are you from South America?'

'Yes, Cordova.'

That made sense. As Edward's speciality was Cordova, it could be useful to have a native of that country to work with him. 'I was at school with the Cordovan Minister, Micky Miranda,' Hugh said.

'He is my cousin.'

'Ah.' There was no family resemblance, but Oliver was immaculately groomed, his hair oiled and combed, his shoes shiny: no doubt he modelled himself on his successful older cousin. 'Well, I hope you enjoy working with us.'

'Thank you.'

Hugh was thoughtful as he returned to his office. Edward needed all the help he could get, but Hugh was a little bothered at having a cousin of Micky's in such a potentially influential position at the bank. His unease was vindicated a few days later.

It was Jonas Mulberry who told him what was going on in the partners' room. 'I don't like it, Mr Hugh,' Mulberry said. 'South American bonds have never been good.'

'We're not launching a South American bond, are we?'

Mulberry nodded. 'Mr Edward proposed it.'

'What's it for?'

'A new railroad from the capital to Santamaria Province.'

Hugh shook his head disapprovingly. 'Investors who like railroads can get six per cent in the United States—why go to Cordova?'

'Exactly.'

Hugh scratched his head. 'I'll try to find out what their thinking is.'

Mulberry flourished a bundle of papers. 'Mr Samuel asked for a summary of liabilities on Far East acceptances. You could take the figures to him.'

Hugh grinned. 'You think of everything.' He took the papers and went down to the partners' room. Only Samuel and Joseph were

there. Hugh put the report on Samuel's table and said, 'Mulberry asked me to give you this.'

'Thank you.' Samuel looked up. 'Something else on your mind?'

'Yes. I'm wondering why we're backing the Santamaria railroad.'

Samuel said, 'Your uncle Joseph feels South America may be ready for revival.'

Hearing his name, Joseph joined in. 'This is a toe dipped into the water to feel the temperature.'

Hugh said, 'But Pilasters has always left it to smaller, more speculative houses to dip their toes into unknown waters.'

Uncle Joseph did not like to be argued with and he replied in an irritated tone, 'One exception will not harm us.'

Hugh frowned. His instinct had been right: the investment did not make commercial sense, and Joseph could not justify it. So why had they done it? As soon as he put the question to himself he saw the answer. 'You've done this because it's Edward, haven't you? This is the first deal he has come up with since you made him a partner, so you're letting him do it, even though it's a poor prospect.'

'It's not your place to question my motives!'

'It's not your place to risk other people's money as a favour to your son. Small investors in Brighton and Harrogate will put up the money for this railroad, and they will lose everything if it fails.'

'You're not a partner, so your opinion is not sought.'

'I'm a Pilaster, though, and when you damage the good name of the bank you injure me.'

Uncle Joseph was now beyond civility. 'Don't you dare stand here in my bank and lecture me, you insolent young whippersnapper. Get out of this room.'

Hugh stared at his uncle for a long moment, then boiling with frustration, he turned and left the room, slamming the door.

Ten minutes later he went to ask Solly Greenbourne for a job.

WHEN HUGH GOT BACK to Pilasters Bank there was a note waiting for him. It read:

*My dear Pilaster,*

*I must see you right away. You will find me in Plage's Coffee-House around the corner. I will wait for you.*

*Your old friend,*

*Antonio Silva.*

So Tonio was back! He had left the country at about the same time as Hugh. What had happened to him since? Full of curiosity, Hugh

went straight to the coffee-house where he found an older, more subdued Tonio, sitting in a corner reading *The Times*. He still had a shock of carrot-coloured hair, but although he was only Hugh's age, twenty-six, there were already tiny lines of worry round his eyes.

'I made a big success of Boston,' Hugh said in answer to Tonio's first question. 'I came back in January. But now I'm having trouble with my damned family all over again. How about you?'

'There have been a lot of changes in my country. My family is not as influential as it once was. The Miranda faction has come between us and President Garcia.'

'Micky's family?'

'Absolutely. They took over the nitrate mines in the north of the country and that has made them rich.' He took a sheaf of papers from his coat. 'Read this article I've written for *The Times*.'

It was a description of conditions at a Miranda mine. Because the trade was financed by Pilasters, Tonio held the bank responsible for the ill-treatment of the miners. At first Hugh was unmoved: poor wages and child labour were features of mines all over the world. But as he read on he saw this was worse. At the Miranda mines, the overseers were armed with whips and guns, and they used them freely to enforce discipline. If labourers—including women and children—tried to leave before they had worked out their contracts they could be shot. Tonio had eyewitness accounts of such 'executions'.

Hugh was horrified that his family's bank was financing such brutality, but for a moment he tried to put aside his feelings and think about consequences. Tonio's article would lead to speeches in Parliament and would be extremely bad for the bank. Do I care? thought Hugh. The bank had treated him badly and he was about to leave it. But he could not ignore this problem. He was still an employee, he would draw his salary at the end of the month, and he owed Pilasters his loyalty at least until then. He had to do something. The fact that Tonio was showing him the article before publishing it suggested that he wanted to make a deal. 'What's your objective?' Hugh asked him. 'Do you want us to stop financing the nitrate trade?'

Tonio shook his head. 'If Pilasters pulled out, someone else would take over. No, we must be more subtle.'

'You've got something specific in mind.'

'The Mirandas are planning a railway.'

'Ah, yes. The Santamaria railroad.'

'That railway will make Papa Miranda the wealthiest and most powerful man in the country. And Papa Miranda is a brute. I want the railway stopped.'



'And that's why you're going to publish this article.'

'Several articles. And I'll hold meetings, lobby Members of Parliament, anything to undermine the financing of this railway.'

It might work, too, Hugh thought. Investors would shy away from anything controversial. 'So why have you come to me?'

'We could short-cut the process. If the bank decides not to underwrite the railway bonds, I won't publish the article.' Tonio gave an embarrassed smile. 'I hope you don't think of this as blackmail. It is a bit crude, I know, but nowhere near as crude as flogging children in a nitrate mine.'

Hugh shook his head. 'Not crude at all. I admire your spirit. The consequences for the bank don't affect me—I'm about to resign.'

'Really!' Tonio was astonished. 'Why?'

'It's a long story. I'll tell you another time. However, the upshot is that all I can do is tell the partners that you've approached me with this proposition. They can decide what they want to do.' He was still holding Tonio's manuscript. 'May I keep this?'

'Yes. I have a copy.'

The sheets of paper bore the letterhead of the Hotel Russe, Berwick Street, Soho. 'I'll get in touch.' He left the coffee-house and walked back to the bank. He went straight to the partners' room, where he found Samuel, Joseph and Edward. He handed Tonio's article to Samuel, who read it and passed it on to Edward.

Edward became apoplectic with rage and was unable to finish it. He handed it to his father, then pointed his finger at Hugh and said, 'You're just jealous of me. The Silva family are enemies of the Mirandas. This is just malicious propaganda.'

'I'm sure that's what your friend Micky will say. But is it true?'

'We don't have to find out whether this tale is true or not,' Uncle Samuel said. 'We're bankers, not judges. The fact that the Santamaria railroad is going to be controversial makes the bond issue riskier, and that means we have to reconsider.'

Uncle Joseph said aggressively, 'I'm not willing to be bullied. Let this South American popinjay publish his article and go to the devil.'

'That's one way to handle it,' Samuel mused. 'We can wait and see what effect the article has on the price of existing South American stocks. If they crash, we'll cancel the Santamaria railroad.'

Joseph, somewhat mollified, said, 'I don't mind submitting to the decision of the market.'

'There is another option,' Samuel went on. 'We could get another bank to join us on the issue of bonds. That way, any hostile publicity would be enfeebled by having a divided target.'

That made sense, Hugh thought. Samuel's strategy would minimise the risk, and that was what banking was all about.

'All right,' Joseph said with his usual impulsiveness. 'Edward, see if you can find us a partner.'

'Who should I approach?' Edward said anxiously. Hugh realised he had no idea how to go about something like this.

Samuel answered him. 'It's a big issue. Go to Greenbournes. You know Solly Greenbourne, don't you?'

'Yes. I'll see him.'

Hugh decided to have one more try at persuading Uncle Joseph to cancel the issue completely. 'Why don't we just wash our hands of the Santamaria railroad?' he said. 'The risk has always been high, and now we're threatened with bad publicity on top. Do we need this?'

Edward said petulantly, 'The partners have made their decision and it's not for you to question them.'

Hugh gave up. 'You're quite right,' he said. 'I'm not a partner, and soon I won't be an employee either.'

Uncle Joseph frowned at him. 'What does that mean?'

'I'm resigning from the bank. I've found a better job.'

Joseph was jolted. 'Where?'

'As a matter of fact I shall be working at Greenbournes.'

Uncle Joseph's eyes looked as if they would pop out. 'But you're the one who knows all the North Americans!'

'I imagine that's why Greenbournes was so keen to hire me.' It was also why he could not advise Solly to turn Edward down on the bond issue. He was being hired as an expert on North America, and it would seem presumptuous if he started out by passing judgment on a completely different area.

'How much are they paying you?'

Hugh stood up to leave. 'That's not for you to ask,' he said firmly.

Edward shrieked, 'How dare you speak to my father that way!'

Joseph's indignation burst like a bubble, and to Hugh's surprise he suddenly calmed down. 'Oh, shut up, Edward,' he said. 'There are times when I wish you were more like Hugh. At least he's got some spunk.' He turned back to Hugh. 'Go on, clear off,' he said without malice. 'I hope you'll come a cropper, but I'm not betting on it.'

'No doubt that's the nearest to good wishes that I'm likely to get from your branch of the family,' Hugh said. 'Good day to you.'

'AND HOW IS DEAR RACHEL?' Augusta asked Micky as she poured the tea.

'She's fine,' Micky said. 'She may come along later.'

'She's a lucky girl,' Augusta said, and favoured Micky with an intimate smile.

He realised that she was flirting and he was failing to respond. He held Augusta's hand for a moment as she passed him a cup of tea. 'You're flattering me,' he said softly.

'No doubt I am. But something is worrying you, I can tell.'

'Dear Mrs Pilaster, as perceptive as always. Why do I ever imagine I can hide anything from you?' He released her hand and took his tea. 'Yes, I'm a little tense about the Santamaria railroad.'

'I thought the partners had agreed to that.'

'They have, but these things take so long to organise.'

'The financial world moves slowly.'

'I understand that, but my family doesn't. Papa sends me cables weekly. I curse the day the telegraph reached Santamaria.'

Edward came in bursting with news. 'Antonio Silva's back!' he said before he had closed the door behind him.

Augusta paled. 'How do you know?'

'Hugh saw him.'

'Antonio's trying to sabotage the Santamaria railroad bond issue.' Edward handed his mother a sheaf of papers. 'Read that.'

Micky said, 'What is it?'

'An article Tonio plans to publish about your family's mines.'

Augusta skimmed the pages rapidly. 'He claims that life as a nitrate miner is dangerous,' she said derisively. 'What has this to do with your bond issue?'

'Investors don't like controversy. Many of them will already be wary of a South American bond. This could scare them off.'

Micky was shaken. 'What does your father say about it?'

'We're trying to get another bank to come in with us, but basically we're going to let Tonio publish. If the publicity causes a crash in South American stocks we'll abandon the Santamaria railroad.'

Damn Tonio to hell. He was clever—and Papa was a fool to run his mines like slave camps and then expect to raise money in the civilised world. But what was to be done? Tonio had to be silenced, but he would not be persuaded or bribed. A chill descended over Micky's heart as he realised he would have to use cruder methods. He pretended to be calm.

'May I see the article?'

Augusta handed it to him.

He noticed the hotel address at the top of the paper. Putting on an air of insouciance he did not feel, he said, 'Why, this is no problem at all. Now that we know where to find him, we can deal with him.'

## MAY

Solly and Maisie Greenbourne went out most evenings. The only time they stayed in was when they were giving a party. Tonight they were going to a dinner, then on to a ball afterwards. Maisie's hair was decorated with yellow silk flowers and she wore a yellow-and-white-striped silk taffeta gown. The bodice was loosely draped and caught at the shoulder with a bow. The rest of the garment was similarly swagged and caught at the waist, knee and hem. Solly helped her arrange the folds until they looked right.

She opened her jewellery box and took out a diamond and emerald necklace and matching earrings that Solly had given her on their first wedding anniversary. As she was putting them on he said, 'We're going to be seeing a lot more of our old friend Hugh Pilaster.'

Maisie muffled a sigh. Solly's trusting nature could be tiresome. The normal suspicious-minded husband would have divined the attraction between Maisie and Hugh, but Solly was too innocent. He had no idea he was putting temptation in her way. 'Why, what's happened?' she said neutrally.

'He's coming to work at the bank.'

'Why is he leaving Pilasters? I thought he was doing well.'

'They refused him a partnership.'

'Oh, no!' She knew Hugh better than anyone, and she could guess how broken he was by the refusal of a partnership. 'The Pilasters are a mean-spirited family,' she said with feeling.

'It's because of his wife.'

Maisie nodded. 'I'm not surprised.' She had witnessed the incident at the Duchess of Tenbigh's ball. Knowing the Pilasters as she did, she wondered if Augusta had somehow stage-managed the whole incident to discredit Hugh.

'You have to feel sorry for Nora.'

'Mmm.' Maisie had taken an instant dislike to Nora, whom she considered a heartless gold-digger.

'Anyway, I thought that you might help her.'

'What?' Maisie said sharply.

'Rehabilitate her. You know what it's like to be looked down on because of your background. You overcame all that prejudice.'

'And now I'm supposed to work the same transformation on every other guttersnipe who marries into society?' Maisie snapped.

'I've obviously said something wrong,' Solly said worriedly. 'I thought you'd be glad to help, you've always been so fond of Hugh.'

Maisie went to her cupboard for her gloves. On the back of the door hung 'The Amazing Maisie' poster from the circus. She suddenly felt ashamed of herself. She ran to Solly and threw her arms round him. 'Oh, Solly, how can I be so ungrateful? Of course I'll do this for you, if you wish.'

'I'd hate to force you into something—'

'No, no, you're not forcing me.' She looked at her husband's chubby face, creased now with lines of anxiety. She stroked his cheek. 'Stop worrying. I was being horribly selfish for a minute, but it's over.' She stood on tiptoe and kissed his lips, then turned away and put on her gloves.

She knew what had really made her cross. In her innermost heart she still wanted to be Hugh's wife, and she hated Nora for winning what she had lost. It was a shameful attitude and Maisie resolved to drop it. She should be glad Hugh had married. She would throw herself energetically into the task of bringing Nora Pilaster back into the good graces of London's high society.

She was able to begin her campaign that very night. When they reached their destination and entered the drawing room of their dinner host, the Marquis of Hatchford, the first person she saw was Count de Tokoly. She knew him quite well and he always flirted with her, so she felt free to be direct. 'I want you to forgive Nora Pilaster for slapping you,' she said.

'Forgive?' he said. 'I'm flattered! To think that at my age I can still make a young woman slap my face—it's a great compliment.'

That wasn't how you felt at the time, Maisie thought. However, she was glad he had decided to make light of the whole incident. 'Tell me something,' she said. 'Did Augusta Pilaster encourage you to flirt with her daughter-in-law?'

'Grisly suggestion!' he replied. 'Mrs Joseph Pilaster as a pander! She did nothing of the kind.'

'Did anyone encourage you?'

He looked at Maisie through narrowed eyes. 'You're clever, Mrs Greenbourne. I'll tell you the truth, as I admire you so much. The Cordovan Minister, Señor Miranda, told me that Nora was . . . what shall we say . . . susceptible.'

So that was it. 'And Micky Miranda was put up to it by Augusta, I'm sure of it. Those two are as thick as thieves.'

De Tokoly was miffed. 'I do hope I haven't been used as a pawn.'

'That's the danger of being so predictable,' Maisie said waspishly.



MICKY MIRANDA STOOD in a doorway in Berwick Street, wearing a light overcoat and smoking a cigar. There was a gas lamp nearby but he stood in the shadow so that his face could not easily be seen by passers-by. It was almost midnight.

The Hotel Russe was across the street. There was a light over the door and inside Micky could see a lobby with a reception counter. However, there did not appear to be anyone there. Two other men loitered on the far pavement, one on either side of the hotel entrance. All three of them were waiting for Antonio Silva.

A few minutes after midnight, Micky thought he recognised Tonio at the far end of Berwick Street. He waited until he passed a gas lamp, when his face became clearly visible for a moment. Then there was no doubt: it was Tonio. Micky could even see the carrot colour of the side-whiskers. Then he saw the policemen.

It was the worst possible luck. There were two of them, coming down Berwick Street from the opposite direction, helmeted and caped, their truncheons hanging from their belts. Micky stood stock-still. There was nothing he could do. They saw him, noted his top hat and his cigar, and nodded deferentially: it was none of their business what an upper-class man might be doing loitering in a doorway—they were after criminals, not gentlemen. They passed Tonio fifteen or twenty yards from the hotel door. Micky fidgeted in frustration. Another few moments and Tonio would be safe inside his hotel.

Then the policemen turned a corner and were gone from sight.

Micky gestured to his two accomplices. They moved fast. Before Tonio reached the door of his hotel, they seized him and bundled him into an alley. He shouted once, but after that his cries were muffled.

Throwing away the remains of his cigar, Micky crossed the road and entered the alley. They had stuffed a scarf into Tonio's mouth and they were beating him with iron bars. His head and face were already covered with blood. 'Stop it, you fools!' he hissed at them. He did not want them to kill Tonio. As things stood, the incident looked like a robbery. A murder would create a great deal more fuss—and the policemen had seen Micky's face, however briefly.

With apparent reluctance the two thugs stopped hitting Tonio, who slumped to the ground and lay still.

'Empty his pockets!' Micky whispered.

Tonio did not move as they took from him a watch and chain, a pocketbook, some coins, a silk handkerchief and a key.

'Give me the key,' Micky said. 'The rest is yours.'

The older of the two men, Barker—humorously known as Dog—said, 'Give us the money.'

He gave them each ten pounds in gold sovereigns.

Dog gave him the key. Tied to it with a thread was a card with the number eleven scrawled on it. It was all Micky needed. He turned and walked away, hoping he would never see the two men again.

To his relief the desk in the little lobby of the Hotel Russe was still unoccupied. He went up the stairs and let himself into room number eleven, a cramped, grimy room stuffed with shabby furniture. Micky put his hat and cane on a chair and began to search methodically. In the desk he found a copy of the article for *The Times*, which he took. However, it was not worth much. Tonio either had copies or could rewrite it from memory. But in order to get the article published he would have to produce some kind of evidence, and it was the evidence that Micky was looking for. He tipped Tonio's shirts and underwear out of the drawers of a chest. There was nothing hidden there. He looked behind and underneath the chest, the bed and the wardrobe. Nothing.

He finally found what he wanted underneath the mattress. Inside a large envelope was a wad of papers tied together with lawyers' ribbons. He untied the ribbons and scanned the documents. They were sworn affidavits of witnesses who had seen floggings and executions at Micky's family's nitrate mines. Micky lifted the sheaf of papers to his lips and kissed them. They were the answer to his prayers. He would send the names of the witnesses to Papa, and Papa would silence them. Without proof, Tonio's article was worthless.

IN THE AFTERNOONS, wealthy ladies and idle gentlemen called on one another. It was a tiresome practice and four days of the week Maisie told her servants to say she was not at home. On Fridays she received people.

Emily Pilaster stayed all afternoon and at half past five, when everyone else had gone, she was still there.

A pretty girl with big blue eyes, she was only about twenty years old and anyone could tell she was miserable, so Maisie was not surprised when she said, 'Please can I talk to you about something personal?'

'Of course, what is it?'

'I do hope you won't be offended but there's no one I can discuss it with.'

'It's hard to offend me,' Maisie said. 'What do you want to discuss?'

'My husband hates me,' she said, and she burst into tears.

Maisie felt sorry for her. She could sympathise with anyone

unfortunate enough to have married Edward. 'This may sound hard, but you're in the same position as thousands of women.'

Emily wiped her eyes and made an effort to stop crying. 'I know, and I realise I've got to make the best of it. I know I could cope with the situation if only I could have a baby.'

Children were the consolation of most unhappy wives, Maisie reflected. 'Is there any reason why you shouldn't have babies?'

Emily was shifting restlessly on the couch, almost writhing with embarrassment, but her childlike face was set in lines of determination. 'I've been married for two months and *nothing's happened*.'

Maisie wondered what Edward's problem was. Was there anything she could do to help Emily? 'I know someone close to Edward,' she said cautiously. 'She might be able to shed light on the problem.'

JOSEPH PILASTER FINISHED off a large plate of grilled lamb's kidneys and scrambled eggs, and began to butter a slice of toast. Augusta wondered whether the customary bad temper of middle-aged men had to do with the amount of meat they ate. The thought of kidneys for breakfast made her feel quite ill.

'Sidney Madler has come to London,' he said. 'He's angry about Hugh's not being a partner.'

'What is it to do with him?' Augusta said. 'The insolence!'

'When we formed our joint enterprise with Madler and Bell there was an understanding that the London end of the operation would be run by Hugh. Now Hugh has resigned, and Madler has come all the way from New York to make a fuss about it.'

'Tell him Hugh has married an impossible wife. He can hardly fail to understand that.'

'Of course.' Joseph stood up. 'Goodbye, dear.'

Augusta kissed her husband on the lips. 'Don't be bullied, Joseph.' His mouth set in a stubborn line. 'I shan't.'

When he had gone she sat at the table, wondering how serious this threat was. While she was finishing her breakfast Hasteed sidled in to tell her that Mr Fortescue was in the drawing room. She immediately put Sidney Madler out of her mind. This was much more important.

Michael Fortescue was her tame politician. Having won the Deaconridge by-election with financial help from Joseph, he was now a Member of Parliament, and indebted to Augusta. 'Tell Mr Fortescue I shall be with him directly,' she told the butler. She sat still for a few moments, trying to make herself calm.

Her campaign had gone according to plan so far. Arnold Hobbes had published a series of articles in *The Forum* calling for peerages for

commercial men. Lady Morte had talked to the Queen about it, and had sung Joseph's praises. And Fortescue had told Prime Minister Disraeli that there was a groundswell of public opinion in favour of the idea. Now perhaps the whole effort was about to bear fruit.

As she entered the drawing room, her head was full of the phrases she hoped soon to hear: *Lady Whitehaven . . . the Earl and Countess of Whitehaven . . . as your ladyship pleases . . .*

Fortescue looked a little tense. Augusta gave him a warm, reassuring smile.

'I've just been with the Prime Minister,' he said. 'I've convinced him that it is time banking was represented in the House of Lords.'

'Wonderful!' said Augusta. But Fortescue had an uncomfortable expression. 'So why do you look so glum?'

'There's also bad news,' Fortescue said.

'What?'

'I'm afraid he wants to give the peerage to Ben Greenbourne.'

'No!' Augusta felt as if she had been punched. 'How can that be?'

Fortescue became defensive. 'I suppose he can give peerages to whoever he pleases. He is the Prime Minister.'

'I didn't go to all this for the benefit of Ben Greenbourne!'

'I agree it's ironic,' Fortescue said languidly. 'But I did my best.'

'Let me think,' she said, and she began to pace up and down the room. 'We must find a way to change the Prime Minister's mind. What are Ben Greenbourne's weaknesses? His son is married to a guttersnipe, but that's not enough . . .' It occurred to her that if Greenbourne got a title it would be inherited by his son Solly, which would mean that Maisie would be a countess. The thought was sickening. 'He's a Jew,' she said suddenly. 'That's the key.'

Fortescue looked dubious. 'The Prime Minister himself is a Jew by birth, and he has now been made Lord Beaconsfield.'

'I know, but Disraeli is a practising Christian.'

'I wonder if it makes a difference,' Fortescue mused.

Augusta thought hard. 'Is there anything we can do to make it make a difference?'

'If there were to be some public protest—questions in Parliament, perhaps, or articles in the press . . .'

'The press,' Augusta said. She thought of Arnold Hobbes. 'Yes!' she said. 'I think that could be arranged.'

HOBBS WAS SPLENDIDLY discombobulated by Augusta's presence in his cramped, inky office. He could not make up his mind whether to tidy up, attend to her or get rid of her. Consequently he did all three:

he moved bundles of proofs from the floor to the table and back again; he fetched her a chair and a glass of sherry and he proposed that they go elsewhere to talk. She let him run wild for a minute or two then said, 'Mr Hobbes, please sit down and listen to me.'

'Of course, of course,' he said, and he subsided into a chair and peered at her through his grimy spectacles.

She told him about Ben Greenbourne's peerage.

'Most regrettable, most regrettable,' he blabbered nervously. 'However, I don't think *The Forum* could be accused of lack of enthusiasm in promoting the cause which you so kindly suggested.'

And in exchange for which you got two directorships of companies controlled by my husband, Augusta thought. 'I know it's not your fault,' she said irritably. 'But what can you do about it?'

'My journal is in a difficult position,' he said worriedly. 'Having campaigned so vociferously for a banker to get a peerage, it's hard for us to turn around and protest when it actually happens.'

Augusta was struck by an idea. 'When Disraeli took his seat in the House of Lords, was the ceremony normal?'

'In every way, I believe.'

'He took the oath of loyalty on a Christian Bible?'

'Indeed. I begin to see your drift, Mrs Pilaster. Would Ben Greenbourne swear on a Christian Bible? I doubt it.'

Augusta shook her head dubiously. 'He might, though, if nothing were said about it. He's not a man to look for a confrontation. But he's very stiff-necked when challenged. If there were to be a noisy public demand for him to swear the same way as everyone else he might well rebel. He wouldn't let people say he had been pushed into anything.'

Hobbes warmed to the idea. 'I see the headline already,' he said excitedly. 'BLASPHEMY IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS. Mrs Pilaster, you're quite brilliant!'

Augusta stood up. 'Thank you,' she said, and she went out.

## JUNE

The Cordovan Ministry was quiet. The offices on the ground floor were empty, the three clerks having gone home. Micky and Rachel had given a small dinner party in the first-floor dining room, but the guests had left and the domestic staff had cleared away. Micky was



about to go out. Lately he and Edward had been spending more and more evenings in their old haunts.

The novelty of being married was beginning to wear off. Micky's wife believed that outside the bedroom a woman should not be a slave to her husband and consequently they were always fighting about domestic issues. And Rachel had a plan to open a maternity hospital for women without husbands. Micky had been very firm with her about it.

Micky combed his hair, filled his cigar case, then went downstairs. To his surprise, Rachel was standing in the hall, barring the way to the door. 'It's eleven o'clock,' she said. 'Where are you going?'

'To the devil,' he replied. 'Out of my way.'

'Are you going to a brothel?'

He was startled enough to be silenced for a moment.

'I see you are,' she said. Her face was white. 'Men catch infectious diseases at such places.'

'The girls there are very clean—'

'Please, Micky—don't pretend to be stupid. Syphilis can be hereditary. I might give it to our children, if we have any. I am not willing to bring a child into the world with such a dreadful disease.' She was breathing in short gasps. 'I'm going to leave you, unless you agree to cease all contact with prostitutes.'

There was no point in further discussion. 'We'll see whether you can leave with a broken nose,' he said, and he raised his cane to strike her. She dodged the blow and ran to the door. Outside, there was a carriage at the kerb. Rachel jumped into it. Micky was amazed at how meticulously she had planned everything.

He slammed the door. He heard the carriage drive away. To his surprise he found himself regretting Rachel's departure. However, he told himself that on balance he would be better off alone.

MAISIE GREENBOURNE'S midsummer ball was one of the fixtures of the London season. She always had the best band, the most delicious food, and endless champagne. But the main reason everyone wanted to go was that the Prince of Wales always came. This year Maisie decided to use the occasion to launch the new Nora Pilaster.

It was a high-risk strategy, for while Maisie was fairly sure she could predict the prince's reactions, now and again he defied expectations and turned on his friends, particularly if he felt he was being used. If that happened Maisie would end up like Nora, cold-shouldered by London society. When she thought about it she was amazed that she had allowed herself to take that risk merely for the

sake of Nora. But it was not for Nora, it was for Hugh.

Hugh was working out his notice at Pilasters Bank. It was now two months since he had resigned. Solly was impatient for Hugh to start at Greenbournes, but the Pilasters partners had insisted he stay the customary three months. No doubt they wanted to postpone as long as possible the moment when Hugh went to work for their rivals.

The guests began to arrive at ten thirty. Maisie did not normally invite Augusta Pilaster, but she had this year, wanting Augusta to see Nora's triumph, if triumph it should be. Maisie had also invited Hugh's New York mentor, Sidney Madler, a charming man of about sixty with a white beard. He turned up in a distinctly American version of evening dress, with a short jacket and a black tie.

Maisie and Solly stood shaking hands for an hour, then the prince arrived. They escorted him into the ballroom and he asked Maisie to dance.

'I've a titbit of gossip for you, sir,' she said as they waltzed.

He held her closer and spoke in her ear. 'How very intriguing, Mrs Greenbourne—do go on.'

'It's about the incident at the Duchess of Tenbigh's ball. It seems someone deliberately provoked it. De Tokoly was told, quite falsely, that the young woman was, how shall I put it, open to invitation.'

'Cunning. Who was behind it?'

Maisie hesitated. She had never before used her friendship with the prince to do someone down. But Augusta was wicked enough to deserve it. 'Do you know who I mean by Augusta Pilaster?'

'Indeed. Matriarch of the *other* banking family.'

'It was she. The girl, Nora, is married to Augusta's nephew, Hugh. Augusta did it to spite Hugh, whom she hates.'

'What a snake she must be! I rather feel like punishing her.'

This was the moment Maisie had been leading up to. 'All you would have to do is notice Nora, to show that she is forgiven.'

The dance ended. Maisie said, 'Shall I present her to you?'

He looked at her shrewdly. 'Did you plan all this, you little minx?'

She had been afraid of this. He was not stupid and he could guess that she had been scheming. It would be better not to deny it. She did her best to blush. 'You have found me out. How foolish of me to think I might pull the wool over *your* eagle eyes.' She changed her expression and favoured him with a direct, candid gaze. 'What shall I do for a penance?'

A lascivious smile passed over his face. 'Don't tempt me. Come, I forgive you.'

Maisie breathed easier: she had got away with it.

'Where is this Nora?' he said.

She was hovering close by, as instructed earlier. Maisie caught Nora's eye and she approached instantly, looking quite bewitching in a gauzy sky-blue gown covered with little satin bows. The off-the-shoulder style made the most of her voluptuous figure. Maisie said, 'Your Royal Highness, may I present Mrs Hugh Pilaster.'

Nora curtsied and batted her eyelashes.

'Charming,' the prince said enthusiastically. 'Quite charming.'

Hugh watched in delight as Nora chatted happily with the Prince of Wales. Yesterday she had been a social outcast. Now her clothes were perfect, her manners charming and she was flirting with the heir to the throne. And the transformation had been brought about by Maisie.

Hugh glanced at Aunt Augusta, standing near him, with Uncle Joseph by her side. She was staring at Nora and the prince. How it must gall her, Hugh thought, to know that Maisie, the working-class girl she derided six years ago, is now so much more influential than she is. With perfect timing, Sidney Madler came over. Looking incredulous, he said to Joseph, 'Is *that* the woman you say is unsuitable as a banker's wife?'

Before Joseph could reply, Augusta spoke. In a deceptively mild voice she said, 'She did lose the bank a major contract.'

Hugh said, 'As a matter of fact, she didn't. That loan is going through.'

Augusta turned on Joseph. 'Count de Tokoly didn't interfere?'

'He seems to have got over his fit of pique quickly,' Joseph said.

Augusta pretended to be pleased. 'How fortunate,' she said.

Madler said, 'Financial need generally outweighs social prejudice.'

'Yes,' said Joseph. 'So it does. I think I may have been hasty. Wouldn't you rather work for the family, Hugh?'

Augusta interrupted in a voice of deadly sweetness. 'Joseph, what are you saying?'

'This is business, my dear—men's talk.' He turned to Hugh. 'We don't want you working for Greenbournes.'

Hugh did not know what to say. He knew that Sidney Madler had made a fuss, and that Uncle Samuel had backed him—but it was almost unknown for Uncle Joseph to admit a mistake. And yet, he thought with mounting excitement, why else was Joseph raising the subject? He tried to steady his nerves. It was time to drive a hard bargain. 'There's only one thing you can offer me that would make me change my mind, and that's a partnership.'

Joseph sighed. 'You're the very devil to negotiate with.'

Madler put in, 'As every good banker should be.'

'Very well,' Joseph said at last. 'I'm offering you a partnership.'

Hugh felt weak. They've backed down, he thought. I've won. He glanced at Augusta. Her face was a rigid mask of self-control. 'In that case,' he said, and he hesitated, savouring the moment. He took a deep breath. 'In that case, I accept.'

Augusta finally lost her composure. She turned red and her eyes seemed to bulge. 'You're going to regret this for the rest of your lives!' she spat. Then she stalked off, cutting a swathe through the crowd in the ballroom as she headed for the door. She realised her rage was showing on her face, and she wished she could hide her feelings, but she was too distraught. All the people she loathed had triumphed. The guttersnipe Maisie, the underbred Hugh and the appalling Nora had thwarted her. Her stomach was twisted in knots of frustration. At the door she buttonholed a footman. 'Call Mrs Pilaster's carriage instantly!' she commanded. He went off at a run.

She left the party without speaking to anyone else. Her husband could go home in a hansom. She fumed all the way to Kensington, where Hasteed was waiting in the hall. 'Mr Hobbes is in the drawing room, ma'am,' he said sleepily. 'I told him you might not be back until dawn, but he insisted on waiting.'

Augusta was in no mood to see the editor of *The Forum*. What was he doing here in the early hours of the morning? She found him asleep by the dying fire. 'Good morning!' she said loudly.

He started and sprang to his feet, peering at her through his smeared spectacles. 'Mrs Pilaster! Good—ah, yes, morning.'

'What brings you here so late?'

'I thought you would like to be the first to see this,' he said, and he handed her a journal, still smelling of the printing press. She opened it to the title page and read the headline: CAN A JEW BE A LORD?

Her spirits lifted. Tonight's fiasco was only one defeat, she reminded herself. There were other battles to be fought.

ON THE MORNING after the ball Hugh woke up feeling jubilant. His wife had been accepted into high society and he was going to be made a partner in Pilasters Bank. Solly would be disappointed that Hugh would not be working for him, but he would understand.

With his morning mail there was a letter from Tonio Silva. Tonio had vanished shortly after Hugh met him in the coffee-house. Hugh had written to the Hotel Russe but got no reply. He opened the letter anxiously. It came from a hospital, asking Hugh to visit. The letter finished: 'Whatever you do, *tell no one where I am.*'

Mystified, Hugh went straight to the hospital. He found Tonio in a

dark, bare ward. His ginger hair had been shaved and his face and head were scarred. 'Dear God!' Hugh said. 'What happened?'

'I was attacked in the street a couple of months ago.'

'You should have contacted me before. We must get you out of here. I'll send my doctor to you, and arrange a nurse—'

'No, thanks, old boy. I appreciate your generosity. But it's safer here. The people who attacked me were not just thieves.'

Hugh took off his hat and sat on the edge of the bed. 'Tell me what happened.'

'My hotel key was taken and the thieves used it to get into my room. Nothing was stolen but the papers pertaining to my article for *The Times*, including affidavits signed by witnesses.'

Hugh was horrified. It chilled his heart to think that Pilasters should have any link with violent crime. 'It almost sounds as if the bank is under suspicion!'

'Not the bank,' Tonio said. 'Pilasters is a powerful institution, but I don't believe it could organise murders in Cordova.'

'Murders?' This was getting worse and worse.

'All the witnesses whose names were on the affidavits stolen from my hotel room have been murdered.'

'I can hardly believe it.'

'They would have killed me, too, I think, were it not that murders are investigated more thoroughly in London.'

'Who is behind all this?'

'Micky Miranda.'

Hugh shook his head incredulously. 'I'm not fond of Micky, as you know, but I can't believe he's a killer.'

'He is,' Tonio said. 'I know for sure.'

'How could you?'

'I know what really happened to Peter Middleton.'

Hugh was electrified. He had been wondering about this for years. 'Go on, man,' he said. 'I can't wait to hear this.'

Tonio hesitated. 'Could you give me a little wine?' he said. There was a bottle of Madeira on the floor beside the bed. Hugh poured some into a glass. While Tonio sipped it, Hugh recalled the heat of that day, the stillness of the air in Bishop's Wood, the scarred rock walls of the swimming-hole, and the cold, cold water.

'The coroner was told that Peter was in difficulty in the pool. He was never told that Edward was ducking him repeatedly.'

'I knew that much,' Hugh interrupted. 'I had a letter from Hump Cammel in the Cape Colony. He was watching from the far side of the pool. But he didn't stay to see the end.'



‘That’s right. You escaped and Hump ran away. That left me, Peter, Edward and Micky.’

‘What happened after I left?’ Hugh said impatiently.

‘I got out and threw a stone at Edward. It was a lucky shot: it hit him square in the middle of the forehead, and drew blood. He came after me and I scrambled up the side of the quarry. Halfway up I looked back. Peter had swum to the side and was trying to get out of the water, but Micky kept pushing his head under. I only glanced at them for a moment, then I continued to climb.’

He took another sip of the wine. ‘When I got to the rim of the quarry I looked back again.’ Tonio paused, and an expression of revulsion crossed his scarred face. ‘By this time Micky was in the water with Peter. What I saw—and I can see it in my memory now as if it were yesterday—was Micky holding Peter under the water. Peter was thrashing about, but Micky had Peter’s head under his arm and Peter couldn’t break the hold. There is absolutely no doubt about it. It was straightforward murder.’

‘Dear God,’ Hugh breathed. ‘So that’s how Peter died.’ He was stunned. ‘But why did you never tell anyone what you had seen?’

‘I was afraid of Micky—afraid he’d do to me what he did to Peter. I’m still afraid of Micky—look at me now! You should be afraid of him too.’

‘I am, don’t worry.’ Hugh was thoughtful. ‘You know, I don’t believe Edward and his mother know the truth about this.’

‘What makes you say so?’

‘Augusta knew that the story they had told, about Edward trying to rescue Peter, was a lie.’

‘How did she know that?’

‘My mother told her, and I told my mother. Which means that Augusta was involved in covering up the truth. Now, I can believe that Augusta would tell any amount of lies for the sake of her son—but not for Micky. In those days she didn’t even know him.’

‘So what do you think happened?’

Hugh frowned. ‘Imagine this. Edward gives up chasing you and goes back to the swimming-hole. He finds Micky dragging Peter’s body out of the water. Micky says, “You fool, you’ve killed him!” Remember, Edward hasn’t seen Micky holding Peter’s head under. Micky pretends that Peter was so exhausted by Edward’s ducking that he drowned. “What am I going to do?” says Edward. Micky says, “We’ll say it was an accident. In fact, we’ll say you tried to rescue him.” Micky thereby covers up his own crime and earns the undying gratitude of Edward and Augusta. Does that make sense?’

Tonio nodded. 'I think you're right.'

'We must go to the police,' Hugh said. 'You're witness to a murder. Micky must be brought to book.'

'You're forgetting something. He has diplomatic immunity.'

Hugh had not thought of that. As the Cordovan Minister, Micky could not be put on trial in Britain. 'He could still be disgraced and sent home.'

Tonio shook his head. 'I'm the only witness. Micky and Edward will both tell a different story. And it's well known that Micky's family and mine are enemies.'

A new thought struck Hugh and he frowned in puzzlement. 'You know, you've solved a mystery for me. I couldn't understand how Peter drowned when he was such a good swimmer. But your answer is an even greater mystery.'

'I'm not sure I follow you.'

'Think about it. Peter was innocently swimming; Edward ducked him, just out of general nastiness; we all ran away; Edward gave chase—and then Micky cold-bloodedly killed Peter. *It has nothing to do with what went before.* Why did it happen? What had Peter done?'

'I see what you mean.'

'Micky Miranda murdered Peter Middleton . . . but why?'

## JULY

Augusta was like a hen that had laid an egg on the day Joseph's peerage was announced. Micky went to the house at teatime as usual and found the drawing room crowded with people congratulating her on becoming the Countess of Whitehaven. She was amazing, Micky thought as he watched everyone buzzing round her like bees in a sunny garden. She had planned her campaign like a general. At one point there had been a rumour that Ben Greenbourne was to get the peerage, but that had been killed by an eruption of anti-Jewish sentiment in the newspapers. Augusta was not admitting, even to Micky, that she had been behind the press coverage, but he was sure of it. In some ways she reminded him of his father: Papa had the same remorseless determination. But Augusta was cleverer. Micky's admiration for her had grown as the years went by.

The only person who had ever defeated her ingenuity was Hugh Pilaster. It was astonishing how difficult he was to crush. Like a

persistent garden weed, he could be stamped on time and time again and he would always grow back stronger than ever. Happily, Hugh had been unable to stop the Santamaria railroad. 'By the way,' Micky said to Edward over the teacups, 'when are you going to sign the contract with Greenbournes?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Good!' Micky would be relieved when the deal was finally sewn up. It had dragged on for half a year.

That evening Edward and Micky dined at the Cowes Club. Throughout the meal Edward was interrupted by people congratulating him. One day he would inherit the title, of course. Micky was pleased. Greater prestige for the Pilasters meant more power for Micky. After dinner they moved to the smoking room. They were among the earliest diners and for a while they were by themselves.

'Will you divorce Rachel?' asked Edward.

'No, that would be a real scandal. Thank God she didn't get pregnant before she left.' Micky waved at a waiter and ordered brandy. 'Speaking of wives,' he said tentatively, 'what about Emily?'

Edward looked embarrassed. 'I see as little of her as you see of Rachel,' he said. 'You know I bought her a country house in Leicestershire a while ago—she spends all her time there.'

'So, we're both bachelors again.'

Edward grinned. 'We were never anything else, really, were we?'

Micky glanced across the empty room and saw the bulky form of Solly Greenbourne in the doorway. For some reason the sight of him made Micky nervous.

When Solly was closer Micky realised he was not wearing his usual amiable smile. In fact he looked positively angry. Micky felt intuitively that there was some problem with the Santamaria railroad deal. Anxiety made him fatuously amicable. 'Hello, Solly, old boy—how's the genius of the Square Mile?'

Solly was not interested in Micky, however. Without even acknowledging the greeting, he faced Edward. 'Pilaster, you're a cad.'

Edward was mystified. 'What the devil are you talking about?'

Solly reddened and he could hardly speak. 'I've discovered that you and that witch you call Mother are behind those filthy articles in *The Forum*.'

Oh, no! Micky said to himself in dismay. He had suspected Augusta's involvement, but how on earth had Solly found out?

The same question occurred to Edward. 'Who's been filling your fat head with such rot?'

'One of your mother's cronies is a lady in waiting to the Queen,'

Solly replied. Micky guessed he was speaking of Harriet Morte. Solly went on, 'She told the Prince of Wales. I've just been with him.'

Solly must be practically insane with anger to speak so indiscreetly about a private conversation with royalty, Micky thought. He tried desperately to cool the temperature. 'Solly, old man, you can't be sure this story is true—'

Solly rounded on him. 'Can't I? When I read in today's paper that Joseph Pilaster has got the peerage that was expected to go to Ben Greenbourne? Can you imagine what this means to my father?'

Micky began to understand how the armour of Solly's amiability had been breached. It was not for himself that he was angry, but for his father. Ben Greenbourne's grandfather had arrived in London with a bale of Russian furs, a five-pound note and a hole in his boot. For Ben to take a seat in the House of Lords would be the ultimate badge of acceptance into English society. It would be much more of an achievement for a Jew. Greenbourne's peerage would have been a triumph not just for himself and his family but for the entire Jewish community in Britain.

Edward said, 'I can't help it if you're a Jew.'

Micky butted in quickly. 'You two shouldn't let your parents come between you. You're partners in a major business enterprise—'

'Don't be a fool, Miranda,' Solly said. 'You can forget about the Santamaria railroad. After our partners hear this story, Greenbournes Bank will never do business with the Pilasters again.'

MICKY TASTED BILE in his throat as he watched Solly leave the room. With one simple sentence he had wiped out all Micky's hopes. He tried to think. Was there anything he could do to prevent Solly cancelling the deal? If there were, it would have to be done quickly, before Solly told the other Greenbournes. He stood up abruptly.

'Where are you going?' Edward said.

Micky decided not to tell Edward what he had in mind. 'To the card room,' he replied. 'Don't you want to play?'

'Yes, of course.' Edward heaved himself out of his chair and they walked out of the room. At the foot of the stairs Micky turned towards the toilets, saying, 'You go on—I'll catch you.'

Edward went upstairs. Micky stepped into the cloakroom, grabbed his hat and cane, and dashed out through the front door.

He looked up and down Pall Mall. It was dusk, and the gas lamps were being lit. He spotted Solly a hundred yards away, a big figure in a top hat heading towards St James's at a brisk waddle.

Micky went after him. He would explain to Solly how important

the railroad was to Cordova. He would say that Solly was punishing millions of impoverished peasants on account of something Augusta had done. Solly was soft-hearted, he might yet be talked round.

Solly turned up a side street, heading back towards his house in Piccadilly. Micky broke into a run. 'Greenbourne!' he called. 'Wait!'

Solly stopped and turned. He recognised Micky and turned away again.

Micky grabbed his arm. 'I must talk to you!'

Solly was breathing hard. 'Take your hands off me.' He broke away from Micky and walked on.

Micky went after him and grabbed him again. Solly tried to pull his arm away but this time Micky held on. 'Listen to me!'

But Solly would not listen. He jerked himself violently out of Micky's grasp, and turned away. Two steps later he came to a cross-street and was forced to stop at the kerb as a carriage went by. Micky took the opportunity to speak to him again. 'Solly, calm down!' he said. 'I only want to reason with you!' To stop him moving away again Micky grabbed Solly's lapels. 'Listen to me!' he yelled.

'Let me go!' Solly got one hand free and punched Micky on the nose.

The blow stung and Micky tasted blood. He lost his temper. 'Damn you!' he cried. He let go of Solly's coat and punched him back, hitting him on the cheek. Solly turned and stepped into the road. At that moment they both saw a carriage coming towards them, being driven very fast. Solly jumped back to avoid being hit.

Micky saw a chance.

If Solly were dead, Micky's troubles would be over. There was no time to reckon the odds, no room for hesitation. Micky gave Solly a mighty shove, pushing him into the road in front of the horses.

The coachman yelled and hauled on the reins. Solly stumbled, saw the horses almost on top of him, fell to the ground and screamed. The horses charged over him. Micky saw the fat body twist and writhe as the ironclad hoofs pounded it. Then the front nearside wheel of the carriage struck Solly's head, and he slumped unconscious. A split second later the rear wheel ran over his skull.

Micky turned away. He felt faint and leaned on the wall. He forced himself to look at the motionless body in the road. Solly's face was unrecognisable, blood smeared the road beside him. He was dead.

And Micky was saved. He looked up and down the street. There was no one around. Only the coachman had seen what happened.

The carriage juddered to a halt thirty yards down the road. The coachman leaped down. Micky walked quickly away, heading back



towards Pall Mall. The coachman called after him: 'Hey! You!' A moment later he was lost in the crowd.

I did it, he thought. He hurried up the steps of the club. With luck nobody would have noticed his absence, he hoped; but as he passed through the front door he had the bad fortune to bump into Hugh Pilaster going out.

Hugh nodded to him and said, 'Evening, Miranda.'

'Evening, Pilaster,' said Micky, cursing Hugh under his breath. He went to the cloakroom. His nose was red from Solly's punch but otherwise he just appeared a little rumped. He straightened his clothing and went up the stairs to the card room.

HUGH WENT TO SEE Maisie two days after Solly died. He found her alone, neatly dressed in black. Her face was lined with grief and she looked as if she had not slept. His heart ached for her. She threw herself into his arms and said, 'Oh, Hugh, he was the best of us!'

When she said that, Hugh himself could not keep the tears back. Until this moment he had been too stunned to cry. It was a dreadful fate to die as Solly had, and he deserved it less than any man Hugh could name. 'There was no malice in him,' he said.

'Why do such things happen?' Maisie said miserably.

Hugh hesitated. He could not help wondering whether Micky had had something to do with the death of Solly. The police were looking for a well-dressed man who had been arguing with Solly just before he was run over. Hugh had seen Micky entering the Cowes Club at around the time Solly died, so he had certainly been in the neighbourhood. But there was no motive: quite the reverse. Solly had been on the point of closing the Santamaria railroad deal that was so close to Micky's heart. Why would he kill his benefactor? Hugh decided to say nothing to Maisie about his suspicions. 'It seems to have been a tragic accident,' he said.

'The coachman thinks Solly was pushed. Why would the witness run away if he wasn't guilty?'

'He may have been attempting to rob Solly. That's what the newspapers are saying.' The papers were full of the sensational story: the grisly death of one of the richest men in the world.

Maisie detached herself from Hugh and sat down. 'And if you had waited a little longer you could have married me instead of Nora.'

Hugh was startled by her frankness. The same thought had come to him within seconds of hearing the news—but he was ashamed of it. It was typical of Maisie to come right out and say what they were both thinking. He was not sure how to respond, so he made a foolish joke.

'If a Pilaster married a Greenbourne, it would be not so much a wedding as a merger.'

'I'm not a Greenbourne. Solly's family never accepted me.'

'You must have inherited a big chunk of the bank, though.'

'I've inherited nothing, Hugh.'

'But that's impossible!'

'It's true. Solly had no money of his own. His father gave him a huge monthly allowance, but he never settled any capital on him, because of me. Even this house is rented. I own my clothes and jewellery, so I'll never starve. But I'm not the heir to the bank—and neither is little Bertie.'

Hugh was astonished—and angry. 'The old man won't even provide for your son?'

'Not a penny. I saw my father-in-law this morning.'

It was a shabby way to treat her, and Hugh as her friend felt personally affronted. 'Will you live with your parents?'

'In Manchester? No. I'll stay in London. Rachel Bodwin is opening a hospital for unmarried mothers: I might help her.'

'There's a lot of fuss about Rachel's hospital. People think it's scandalous.'

'Then it should suit me very well!'

Hugh was worried by Ben Greenbourne's ill-treatment of his daughter-in-law. He decided he would try to change the man's mind. He would not mention it to Maisie beforehand, though. He did not want to raise her hopes. 'You need a lawyer to represent your interests,' he counselled.

She shook her head. 'I no longer belong to the class of people who call in a lawyer the way they summon a footman. I have to count the cost. I shan't see a lawyer unless I feel I'm being cheated. And I don't think that will happen. Ben Greenbourne isn't dishonest. He's just hard: as hard as iron, and as cold.'

'You're very philosophical,' Hugh said. He admired her courage.

Maisie shrugged. 'I've had an amazing life, Hugh. I was destitute at eleven and fabulously wealthy at nineteen. I've no regrets. Except that you married Nora.'

'I'm very fond of her,' he said unconvincingly.

'You were angry because I wouldn't have an affair with you, and you picked Nora because she reminded you of me. But she's not me and now you're unhappy.'

Hugh winced as if he had been struck. All this was painfully near the truth. 'You never liked her,' he said.

'And you may say I'm jealous, and you may be right, but I still say

she never loved you and married you for your money. I'll bet you've found that out since the wedding, haven't you?

It was true, Hugh thought. Nora was never happy unless he bought her gifts. 'She's always been deprived,' he said. 'It's not surprising she became materialistic.'

'She was not as deprived as I was,' Maisie said scornfully. 'Even you were taken out of school for want of money, Hugh. It's no excuse for false values. The world is full of poor people who understand that love and friendship are more important than riches.'

Feeling confused, Hugh fell back on what he knew to be right. 'Well, I've married her now, and I won't leave her,' he said.

Maisie smiled tearfully. 'I knew you would say that.' She stood up. 'Thank you for coming, dear Hugh,' she said.

He intended to shake her hand but instead he bent to kiss her cheek; and then somehow he found himself kissing her lips. It was a soft, tender kiss that lingered for a long moment and almost destroyed Hugh's resolve; but then at last he tore himself away and left the room without another word.

BEN GREENBOURNE'S HOUSE was another palace a few yards along Piccadilly. Hugh went straight there after seeing Maisie. He was glad to have something to do, some way of taking his mind off the turmoil in his heart. The butler showed him into the library. Ben Greenbourne had no shoes on and sat on a plain wooden stool. He looked old and worn, but he showed no sign of tears. He stood up, formal as ever, and shook hands, then waved Hugh to another stool.

Greenbourne had a letter in his hand. 'Listen to this,' he said, and he began to read. 'Dear Papa, We have a new Latin teacher, Reverend Green, and I am getting on much better. Waterford caught a rat and he is training it to eat out of his hand. The food here is too little, can you send me a cake? Your loving son, Solomon.' He folded the letter. 'He was fourteen when he wrote that.'

'I remember that rat,' Hugh said. 'It bit Waterford's forefinger off.'

'How I wish I could turn back the years,' Greenbourne said, and Hugh saw that the old man's self-control was weakening.

'I must be one of Solly's oldest friends,' Hugh said. 'But I've come here not just as Solly's friend, but as Maisie's too.'

Greenbourne stiffened immediately.

Hugh went on, 'I met her soon after Solly did. I fell in love with her myself, but Solly won her.'

'He was richer.'

'Mr Greenbourne, I hope you will allow me to be frank. Maisie was

a penniless girl looking for a rich husband. But after she married Solly she kept her part of the bargain. She was a good wife to him.'

'And she has had her reward,' Greenbourne said. 'She has enjoyed the life of a lady for five years.'

'I don't think it's good enough. What about little Bertie? Surely you don't want to leave your grandson destitute?'

'Grandson?' said Greenbourne. 'Hubert is no relation to me.'

Hugh had an odd premonition that something momentous was about to happen. 'What do you mean?' he said.

'That woman was already with child when she married my son.'

Hugh gasped.

'Solly knew the child was not his,' Greenbourne went on. 'He took her all the same—against my will, I need hardly add.'

Hugh felt as if his heart had stopped. There was a question he had to ask, but he was terrified of the answer. 'Who was the father?'

'She would never say,' Greenbourne said. 'Solly never knew.'

But Hugh did. Maisie had never been promiscuous, despite appearances. She had been a virgin when he seduced her. He had made her pregnant, on that first night. Then Augusta had contrived to split them up, and Maisie had married Solly.

'It is appalling, of course,' Greenbourne said, seeing his consternation and misunderstanding the reason for it.

I have a child, Hugh thought. A son. Hubert. Called Bertie. The thought wrenched at his heart. He had to get away. He stood up. 'I must go. My deepest condolences, Mr Greenbourne. Solly was the best man I ever knew.' Hugh went out into the sunshine of Piccadilly and walked west, heading for his home in Kensington. He could have taken a hansom but he wanted time to think. Everything was different now. Nora was his legal wife but Maisie was the mother of his son. Nora could look after herself—and so could Maisie, for that matter—but a child needed a father. Suddenly the question of what he was to do with the rest of his life was open again. He tried to consider the practicalities. He had no grounds for divorce, but he felt sure that Nora would divorce him, if she were offered enough money. The Pilasters would ask him to resign from the bank: the social stigma of divorce was too great to allow him to continue as a partner, but what was that balanced against the joy of being with the woman he had always loved?

He found himself outside his own house. Nora would be in her overdecorated bedroom, dressing for lunch. What was to stop him walking in and announcing that he was leaving her? He wondered what she would say, and his imagination gave him the answer. He

pictured her face set in lines of hard determination, and he heard the unpleasant edge to her voice, and he could guess the exact words she would use: 'It will cost you every penny you've got.'

Oddly enough, that decided him. If he had pictured her bursting into tears of sadness he would have been unable to go through with it, but he knew his first intuition was right.

He went into the house and ran up the stairs.

She was in front of the mirror, putting on a pendant of rubies and sapphires he had given her. She spoke before he did. 'I've got some news,' she said.

'Never mind that now—'

But she would not be put off. She had an odd expression on her face: half triumphant, half sulky. 'You'll have to stay out of my bed for a while, anyway.'

Suddenly Hugh guessed what she was going to say. He felt as if he had been hit by a train. It was too late: he could never leave her now. He felt revulsion, and the pain of loss: loss of Maisie, loss of his son.

He looked into her eyes. There was defiance there, almost as if she had guessed what he had been planning. Perhaps she had. Then she said it. 'I'm going to have a baby.'

## Part Three – 1890

### SEPTEMBER

Joseph Pilaster died in September 1890, having been senior partner of Pilasters Bank for seventeen years. During that period Britain had grown steadily richer, and so had the Pilasters. Joseph's estate came to more than two million pounds.

On the morning of the funeral Hugh inspected his face in his shaving mirror, looking for signs of mortality. He was thirty-seven years old. His hair was going grey, but the stubble he was scraping off his face was still black. Curly moustaches were fashionable and he wondered whether he should grow one to make himself look younger.

Hugh and Nora had moved to a bigger house when the children started coming. They had three sons: Tobias, named for Hugh's father; Samuel, for his uncle; and Solomon, for Solly Greenbourne. Nora produced babies with little difficulty but once they were born she lost interest in them, and Hugh gave them a lot of attention to compensate for their mother's coldness.

Hugh's secret child, Maisie's son Bertie, now sixteen, was a



prizewinning scholar at Windfield School and star of the cricket team. Hugh paid his fees and visited the school on Speech Day. Perhaps this led a few cynical people to suspect that he was Bertie's real father. But he had been Solly's friend, and everyone knew that Solly's father refused to support the boy, so most people assumed he was simply being generously faithful to the memory of Solly.

When Hugh went down to breakfast his mother was already there. She and Dotty had come up from Folkestone yesterday. Hugh kissed his mother and sat down, and she said without preamble, 'Do you think he really loves her, Hugh?'

Hugh did not have to ask whom she was talking about. Dotty, now twenty-three, was engaged to Lord Ipswich, eldest son of the Duke of Norwich. Nick Ipswich was heir to a bankrupt dukedom, and Mama was afraid he only wanted Dotty for her money, or rather her brother's money. Hugh looked fondly at his mother. She still wore black, twenty-four years after the death of his father. Her hair was now white, but in his eyes she was as beautiful as ever. 'He loves her, Mama,' he said.

Dotty came down a few minutes later. Hugh's shy, giggly little sister had become a sultry woman, strong-willed and quick-tempered. Hugh guessed that a lot of young men were intimidated by her. But Nick Ipswich had a quiet strength that did not need the prop of a compliant wife.

Nick called, by appointment, at ten, while they were still sitting round the breakfast table. He sat next to Dotty and took a cup of coffee. He had typically English good looks, fair hair and blue eyes, and Dotty looked at him as if she wanted to eat him with a spoon.

Hugh had asked for this meeting, so he plunged right in. 'Dotty, your fiancé and I have had several discussions about money.'

Mama got up to leave, but Hugh stopped her. 'Women are supposed to understand money nowadays, Mama—it's the modern way.' She smiled at him as if he were being a foolish boy, but she sat down again.

Hugh went on: 'As you all know, Nick had been thinking of reading for the Bar, as the dukedom no longer provides a living.' As a banker Hugh understood exactly how Nick's father had lost everything. The duke had been a progressive landowner, and in the agricultural boom of the mid-century he had borrowed money to finance improvements. Then in the 1870s had come the great agricultural depression. The price of farmland had slumped and the duke's lands were worth less than the mortgages on them.

'However, if Nick could get rid of the mortgages and rationalise the

dukedom, it could still generate a considerable income.'

Nick added, 'I'm going to sell a lot of outlying farms, and concentrate on making the most of what's left.'

Hugh said, 'We've worked out that the finances of the dukedom can be transformed, permanently, with about a hundred thousand pounds. So that is what I'm going to give you as a dowry.'

Dotty threw her arms round her fiancé and kissed him, then came round the table and kissed Hugh. Hugh felt a little awkward, but he was glad to be able to make them so happy.

Nora came down dressed for the funeral in purple and black bombazine. She had taken breakfast in her room, as always. 'Where are those boys?' she said irritably, looking at the clock. 'I told that wretched governess to—'

She was interrupted by the arrival of the governess and the children: eleven-year-old Toby; Sam, who was six; and Sol, four. They were all in black morning coats and black ties and carried top hats. Hugh felt a glow of pride. 'My little soldiers,' he said. 'What was the Bank of England's discount rate last night, Toby?'

'Unchanged at two and a half per cent, sir,' said Tobias, who had to look it up in *The Times* every morning.

Sam, the middle one, was bursting with news. 'Mama, I've got a pet,' he said excitedly. He took a matchbox from his pocket, held it out to his mother, and opened it. 'Bill, the spider!' he said proudly.

Nora screamed, knocked the box from his hand, and jumped away. 'Horrible boy!' she yelled.

Sam scrambled on the floor for the box. 'Bill's gone!' he cried, and burst into tears.

Nora turned on the governess. 'How could you let him do this—'

Hugh intervened. He put an arm round Nora's shoulders. 'You were taken by surprise, that's all.' He wished she could be more affectionate with the boys. She had been a baby when her own mother died, and he guessed that was why she found it so difficult to mother her own children: she had never learned how. He ushered her out into the hall, and called back to the others. 'Come on, everyone, it's time to leave.'

KENSINGTON METHODIST HALL was packed to the galleries, with people standing in the aisles and at the back. The family were ushered to reserved seats in the front row. Hugh sat next to his uncle Samuel, who was in his seventies but still alert.

Samuel was the obvious choice as senior partner, now that Joseph was dead. He was the oldest and most experienced. However,

Augusta would oppose him fiercely. She would probably back Joseph's brother, Young William, now forty-two. Among the other partners, two would not be considered because they did not bear the Pilaster name: Major Hartshorn and Sir Harry Tonks, husband of Clementine. The remaining partners were Hugh and Edward. Edward was sitting next to his mother. He was heavy and red-faced in middle age, and he had recently developed some kind of skin rash. He was neither intelligent nor hard-working and in seventeen years he had managed to learn very little about banking. He relied on his clerk, Simon Oliver, to keep him out of trouble. The idea of his being senior partner was unthinkable.

Next to Edward was Micky Miranda, fiendishly debonair in a grey coat with a black mink collar. He and Edward were still as thick as thieves, and Micky was involved in many of the South American investments the bank had backed over the last ten years, investments that, in Hugh's opinion, were much too risky.

The service was long and tedious, then the procession from the hall to the cemetery, in the relentless September rain, took more than an hour, because of the hundreds of carriages following the hearse.

Hugh studied Augusta as the coffin was lowered into the ground. She stood under an umbrella held by Edward. Her hair was all silver, and she looked magnificent in a huge black hat. Surely now, when she had lost the companion of a lifetime, she would seem human. But her proud face was carved in stern lines, and she showed no grief.

After the burial there was a lunch at Augusta's for the whole Pilaster family, including all the partners with their wives and children, plus close business associates and long-time hangers-on such as Micky Miranda. Hugh had not been inside the house for a year or two, and since his last visit it had been redecorated yet again, this time in the newly fashionable Arab style. Moorish arches had been inserted in the doorways, and here in the drawing room were a Cairo screen and a Koran stand.

Augusta sat Edward in his father's chair. Hugh thought that was a bit tactless. Putting him at the head of the table cruelly emphasised how incapable he was of filling his father's shoes. Joseph had been an erratic leader but he had not been a fool. However, Augusta had a purpose as always. Towards the end of the meal she said, with her customary abruptness, 'There must be a new senior partner as soon as possible, and obviously it will be Edward.'

Hugh was horrified. This was totally unexpected. He felt sure she could not possibly get her way, but it was unnerving that she should even make the suggestion. There was a silence, and he realised that

everyone was waiting for him to speak. He was regarded by the family as the opposition to Augusta. 'I think the partners should discuss the question tomorrow,' he said.

Augusta was not going to let him off that easily. She said, 'I'll thank you not to tell me what I may and may not discuss in my own house, young Hugh.'

'If you insist.' He collected his thoughts. 'You, dear Aunt, clearly don't understand the subtleties of the decision, perhaps because you have never worked at the bank, or indeed worked at all—'

'How dare you—'

He raised his voice and overrode her. 'The oldest surviving partner is Uncle Samuel,' he said. 'I'm sure we would all agree that he would be a wise choice, and highly acceptable to the financial community. However, Uncle Samuel has declined the honour once before. If he should do so again, the eldest Pilaster would be Young William, who is also widely respected in the City.'

Augusta said impatiently, 'It is not the City that has to make the choice—it is the Pilaster family. We have the right to choose who we like!'

Hugh shook his head vigorously. 'We have no rights, only duties,' he said emphatically. 'We're entrusted with millions of pounds of other people's money. We can't do what we like: we have to do what we must.'

Augusta tried another tack. 'Edward is the son and heir.'

'It's not a hereditary title! It goes to the most able.'

Augusta was indignant. 'Edward is as good as anyone!'

Hugh looked round the table, dramatically holding the gaze of each partner for a moment before moving on. 'Is there anyone here who will put his hand on his heart and say that Edward is the most able banker among us?'

His question got no response and he realised that Augusta must have spoken to them beforehand. But surely she could not have persuaded them to accept Edward as senior partner? He began to feel seriously worried. 'What has she said to you?' he said abruptly. He looked at each of them again in turn. 'William? George? Harry? Come on, out with it. You've discussed this earlier and Augusta has nobbled you.'

They all looked a little foolish. Finally William said, 'Nobody has been nobbled, Hugh. But Augusta and Edward have made it clear that unless Edward becomes senior partner, they will withdraw their capital from the business.'

'What?' Hugh was stunned. Withdrawing your capital was a





cardinal sin in this family. Between them, Augusta and Edward controlled about forty per cent of the bank's capital, over two million pounds. If they withdrew the money, the bank would be crippled. It was startling that Augusta should make such a threat—and even worse that the partners were ready to give in to her. 'You're surrendering all authority to her!' he said. 'If you let her get away with it this time she'll do it again. Any time she wants something she can just threaten to withdraw her capital and you'll cave in. You might as well make *her* senior partner.'





Edward blustered, 'Don't you dare speak of my mother like that—mind your manners!'

'Manners be damned,' Hugh said rudely. 'You're about to ruin a great bank. Augusta's blind, Edward is stupid and the rest of you are too cowardly to stop them.' He pushed back his chair and stood up, throwing his napkin down on the table like a challenge. 'Well, here's one person who won't be bullied. I resign.'

As he turned from the table he caught Augusta's eye, and saw on her face a victorious smile.

UNCLE SAMUEL CAME to see him that evening. He looked weary and sad. Hugh offered him a drink and he asked for port. Hugh called his butler and ordered a bottle decanted.

'I shall resign, too,' Samuel said. 'I told them so after you made your dramatic exit. I don't know whether I should have spoken up earlier. It wouldn't have made any difference.'

'What else did they say?'

'Well, that's why I'm here, really, dear boy. I regret to say I'm a sort of messenger from the enemy. They asked me to persuade you not to resign.'

'Then they're complete fools.'

'That they certainly are. However, there is one thing you ought to think about. If you resign immediately, everyone in the City will know why. People will say that if Hugh Pilaster believes Edward can't run the bank he's probably right. It could cause a loss of confidence.'

'Well, if the bank has weak leadership people ought to lose confidence in it. Otherwise they'll lose their money.'

'But what if your resignation creates a financial crisis?'

Hugh had not thought of that. A crisis might bring down other, perfectly sound businesses, the way the collapse of Overend & Gurney had destroyed Hugh's father's firm in 1866.

'Perhaps you ought to stay until the end of the financial year, like me,' Samuel said. 'It's only a few months. By then Edward will have been in charge for a while and people will be used to it.'

The butler came back with the port. Hugh sipped it thoughtfully. He had to agree to Samuel's proposal, much as he disliked the idea. If he were to allow the bank to suffer because of his own feelings, he would be no better than Augusta. 'All right,' he said. 'I'll stay until the end of the year.'

Samuel nodded. 'I thought you would,' he said. 'It's the right thing to do—and you always do the right thing, in the end.'

BEFORE MAISIE GREENBOURNE had said goodbye to high society, eleven years before, she had gone to all her friends and persuaded them to give money to Rachel Bodwin's Southwark Female Hospital. Consequently, the hospital's costs were covered by the income from its investments. The money was managed by Rachel's father, the only man involved in the running of the hospital.

Maisie was a widow, but Rachel was still married to Micky Miranda. Rachel never saw her husband, but he would not divorce her. For ten years Rachel had been carrying on a discreet affair with Maisie's brother Dan, who was a Member of Parliament. The three

of them lived together in Maisie's house in suburban Walworth.

The hospital was in working-class Southwark, in the heart of the city. Maisie's office was near the main entrance, had two comfortable chairs, a faded rug and bright curtains. The woman sitting opposite her was barefoot, ragged and nine months pregnant. In her eyes was the wary, desperate look of a starving cat. Maisie said, 'What's your name, dear?'

'Rose Porter, mum.'

They always called her 'mum', as if she were a grand lady. She had long ago given up trying to make them call her Maisie. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'Yes, please, mum.'

Maisie poured tea into a plain china cup. 'You look tired.'

'I've walked all the way from Bath, mum.'

It was a hundred miles. 'It must have taken a week!' said Maisie.

Rose burst into tears.

This was normal, and Maisie was used to it. She sat on the arm of Rose's chair, put her arm round her shoulders and hugged her.

'I know I've been wicked,' Rose sobbed.

'You aren't wicked,' Maisie said. 'We're all women here, and we don't talk of wickedness. That's for clergymen and politicians. Tell me how you met your young man.'

'He came up and spoke to me in the street. It was my afternoon off, and I had a new yellow parasol. I looked a treat, I know I did. That yellow parasol was the undoing of me.'

Maisie coaxed the story out of her. It was typical. The man was an upholsterer. He had courted her and they had talked of marriage. Then he had lost his job. He moved to another town, looking for work; wrote to her once or twice; and vanished out of her life. Then she found she was pregnant.

'We'll try to get in touch with him,' Maisie said.

'I don't think he loves me any more.'

'We'll see.' It was surprising how often such men were willing to marry the girl, in the end.

Rose winced, and Maisie said, 'What's the matter?'

'My back hurts. It must be all the walking.'

Maisie smiled. 'It's not backache. Your baby's coming.' She took Rose upstairs and handed her over to a nurse. 'It's going to be all right,' she said. 'You'll have a lovely bonny baby.'

She stopped beside the bed of the woman they called Miss Nobody, who refused to give any details about herself, not even her name. She was a dark-haired girl of about eighteen. Her accent was upper-class

and Maisie was fairly sure she was Jewish. 'How do you feel, my dear?' Maisie asked her.

'I'm comfortable—and so grateful to you, Mrs Greenbourne.'

She was as different from Rose as could be, but they were both in the same predicament.

When Maisie got back to her room she resumed the letter she had been writing to the editor of *The Times*. She was interrupted again by a knock at the door. 'Come in,' she said.

The woman who entered was neither poor nor pregnant. She had big blue eyes and a girlish face, and she was richly dressed. Emily, the wife of Edward Pilaster, was one of the hospital's supporters. She sat down, then got up again and checked that the door was firmly shut. Then she said, 'I've fallen in love.'

Maisie was not sure this was unqualified good news, but she said: 'How wonderful! Who with?'

'Robert Charlesworth. He's a poet and he writes about Italian art. He lives in Florence most of the year.'

'He sounds madly romantic,' Maisie said.

'Oh, he is, he's so soulful, you'd love him. That's why I came to see you. Do you know anything about getting a marriage annulled?'

'Goodness!' Maisie thought for a moment. 'On the grounds that the marriage has never been consummated, I presume?'

'Yes.'

Maisie nodded. 'I do know about it, yes. The way to do it would be to persuade Edward to cooperate. How does he feel about you?'

'He hates me.'

'Do you think he'd like to get rid of you?'

'I don't think he cares, so long as I stay out of his way.'

'And if you didn't stay out of his way?'

Maisie was sure Emily could make an unbearable nuisance of herself once she put her mind to it. She glanced at the clock. She would have to hurry, she realised. It was the first day of term at Windfield School and she had to take Bertie.

MAISIE GREENBOURNE ATTRACTED a lot of attention at Windfield School for several reasons. She was known to be the widow of the fabulously wealthy Solly Greenbourne, although she had very little money herself. She was also notorious as an 'advanced' woman who believed in women's rights. And then, when she brought Bertie to school, she was always accompanied by Hugh Pilaster, the handsome banker who paid her son's fees. But the main reason was that at thirty-five she was still pretty enough to turn men's heads. Today she

was wearing a tomato-red outfit, a dress with a short jacket over it and a hat with a feather. She knew she looked pretty and carefree. In fact these visits to the school with Bertie and Hugh broke her heart.

It was seventeen years since she had spent a night with Hugh, and she loved him as much as ever. He had known for eleven years that he was Bertie's real father. Ben Greenbourne had given him a hint, and he had confronted her with his suspicions. She told him the truth. Since then he had done everything he could for Bertie, short of acknowledging him as his son. Bertie believed his father was the late, lovable Solomon Greenbourne, and to tell him the truth would cause unnecessary pain. Maisie told her son that Hugh was his dead father's best friend. Bertie was tall and strong, a good athlete and a hard-working student, and Maisie was very proud of him.

On these occasions Hugh was scrupulously polite to Maisie, playing the role of family friend, but she could tell that he felt the bittersweetness of the situation as painfully as she did. Maisie knew, from Rachel's father, that Hugh was considered a prodigy in the City. When he talked about the bank his eyes sparkled. But he did not like to talk about his house, his social life, or—least of all—his wife. The only aspect of his family life he told her about was his three sons, whom he loved to distraction. Over the years Maisie had watched him resign himself to a cold, frustrating marriage.

Today he had on a silver-grey tweed suit that matched his silver-streaked hair, and a bright blue tie the colour of his eyes. She took his arm as they walked into Windfield School, and she thought she would give her soul to be with him every day.

They helped Bertie unpack his trunk, then he made them tea in his study. 'My boy Toby will be coming here next half,' Hugh said as they drank their tea. 'I wonder if you'd keep an eye on him for me?'

'I'll be glad to,' Bertie said. 'I'll make sure he doesn't go swimming in Bishop's Wood.' Maisie frowned at him, and he said, 'Sorry. Bad joke.'

'They still talk about that, do they?' Hugh said.

'Every year the head tells the story of how Peter Middleton drowned, to try and frighten chaps. But they still go swimming.'

After tea they said goodbye to Bertie, walked back into the town, and took the train to London. As they watched the scenery flash by, Hugh said, 'Edward is going to be senior partner at the bank.'

Maisie was startled. 'I didn't think he had the brains!'

'He hasn't. I shall resign at the end of the year.'

'Oh, Hugh!' Maisie knew how much he cared for that bank. All his hopes were tied up in it. 'What will you do?'



'I don't know.'

Maisie felt very sad for Hugh. He had had so much bad luck, while Edward had far too much good. 'Edward is Lord Whitehaven, too. Do you realise that if the title had gone to Ben Greenbourne, Bertie would be in line to inherit it?'

'Yes.'

'But Augusta put a stop to all that.'

'Augusta?' said Hugh with a puzzled frown.

'Yes. She was behind all that rubbish in the newspapers about "Can a Jew be a lord?" Do you remember?'

'I do, but how can you be so sure that Augusta was behind it?'

'The Prince of Wales told us.'

Hugh shook his head. 'Augusta never ceases to amaze me.'

'Anyway, poor Emily is Lady Whitehaven now.'

'At least she got something out of that wretched marriage.'

'I'm going to tell you a secret,' Maisie said. She lowered her voice. 'Emily is about to ask Edward for an annulment on the grounds of non-consummation.'

'Good for her!' Hugh said. 'She'll have trouble with my family.'

'With Augusta, you mean.' That had been Maisie's reaction too. 'Emily knows that. But she's got a streak of obstinacy that should serve her well.'

Maisie sat in silence for a while, looking out of the window at the London suburbs. She thought of Hugh and his marriage. Now that he was leaving the bank, what was left in his life? He did not love his wife and his wife did not love their children. Why should he not find happiness in the arms of Maisie, the woman he had always loved?

At Paddington Station he helped her into a hansom. As they said goodbye she held his hands and said, 'Come home with me.'

He looked sad and shook his head.

'We love each other—we always have,' she pleaded. 'Come with me, and to hell with the consequences.'

Hugh smiled at her. 'You thought of consequences once.'

Maisie knew he was talking about the night at Kingsbridge Manor when she had locked her bedroom door against him. 'I was married to a good man. Your situation is different.'

'That night at Kingo's house I would have betrayed Solly's trust willingly, if you had let me. But integrity has become more concrete to me over the years. Now I think I value it more than anything else.'

'But what is it?'

'It means telling the truth, keeping promises, taking responsibility for your mistakes. It's a matter of being what you claim to be, doing

what you say you'll do. And a banker of all people can't be a liar. After all, if his wife can't trust him, who can?"

He withdrew his hands and stepped back. 'Goodbye, dear Maisie.'

She stared at him helplessly. Years of suppressed yearning caught up with her. She felt maddened by frustration.

Hugh nodded to the cabbie and said, 'Drive on.' The man touched the horse with his whip, and the wheels turned.

HUGH SLEPT BADLY that night. He kept waking up and running over his conversation with Maisie. He wished he had given in and gone home with her. But something else was bothering him, too. He had a feeling she had said something momentous, the significance of which eluded him. He ran over the conversation backwards: *Come home with me . . . Emily is about to ask Edward for an annulment . . . Emily is Lady Whitehaven now . . . Do you realise that if the title had gone to Ben Greenbourne, Bertie would be in line to inherit it?*

Hugh had not realised that Augusta had been behind the nasty propaganda about whether a Jew could be a lord. But the Prince of Wales had known, somehow, and he had told Maisie and Solly.

Suddenly Hugh sat up in bed, staring into the darkness.

Solly had known.

If Solly knew that the Pilasters were responsible for a campaign of racial hatred against his father, he would have cancelled the Santamaria railroad issue. He would have told Edward that he was cancelling it. And Edward would have told Micky.

'Oh, my God,' Hugh said aloud. Had Micky murdered *two* of his friends, Peter Middleton and Solly Greenbourne? And if he had, what was Hugh going to do about it?

HE WAS STILL AGONISING over the question the next day when his clerk, Jonas Mulberry, told him that he had seen some papers being drawn up by Edward's clerk, Simon Oliver. Apparently Edward was going to propose a two-million-pound loan issue to enable the Mirandas to build a new harbour in Santamaria Province.

Hugh was appalled. The bank needed less exposure to South American debt—not more. But what could he do about it? Edward was senior partner now, and he was completely under the influence of Micky Miranda. Could Hugh weaken that influence? He could tell Edward that Micky was a murderer. Edward would not believe him. But he had to try.

Edward had already left for lunch. Guessing his destination, Hugh took a hansom to the Cowes Club. It was still early, and he found

Edward alone in the smoking room, drinking a large glass of Madeira. Edward's skin rash was getting worse, he noticed: where his collar chafed his neck it was red and raw.

Hugh sat down and ordered tea. Edward made no bones about showing that he had no wish for his cousin's company. 'You didn't come this far for a cup of tea,' he said. 'What do you want?'

It was a bad start. Feeling pessimistic, Hugh began. 'I have something to say that will shock you.'

'Really?'

'I think Micky Miranda is a murderer.'

'Oh, for God's sake,' Edward said angrily.

'Listen to me before you dismiss the idea out of hand,' Hugh said. 'Yesterday I learned that Solly Greenbourne knew your mother was behind the campaign to stop Ben Greenbourne getting a peerage.'

Edward gave a start, as if what Hugh had said chimed with something he already knew. Hugh felt more hopeful. 'I'm on the right track, am I not?' he said. Guessing, he went on: 'Solly threatened to cancel the Santamaria railroad deal, didn't he?'

Edward nodded. 'I was at this very table, with Micky, when Solly came in, angry as the devil. But—'

'And that night Solly died?'

'Yes—but Micky was with me all night.'

'He must have left for a few minutes.'

'No—'

'I saw him coming into the club about the time Solly died.'

'That must have been earlier.'

'He may have gone to the cloakroom, or something.'

'That hardly gives him enough time.' Edward's face settled into an expression of decided scepticism. 'Micky's not a murderer.'

'He is. He killed Peter Middleton, too.'

'This is ridiculous!'

'You think *you* killed him. You ducked him repeatedly, and you think Peter was too exhausted to swim to the side, and drowned. But there's something you don't know. Peter was a very strong swimmer.'

'He was a weed!'

'Yes—but he had been practising swimming every day that spring. He was a weed all right, but he could swim for miles. He swam to the side without difficulty—Tonio saw it.'

'What . . .' Edward swallowed. 'What else did Tonio see?'

'While you were climbing up the side of the quarry, Micky held Peter's head under the water until he drowned.'

To Hugh's surprise, Edward did not spurn the idea. Instead he said,

'Why have you waited so long to tell me this?'

'I didn't think you'd believe me.' He studied Edward's expression. 'But you do believe me, don't you?'

Edward nodded.

'Why?'

'Because I know why he did it.'

'Why?' said Hugh. 'Why did Micky kill Peter?'

Edward took a swallow of his Madeira, then he spoke. 'In Cordova the Mirandas are a wealthy family, but their dollars don't buy much here. When Micky came to Windfield he spent his entire allowance in a few weeks. When he ran out of money . . . he stole.'

Hugh remembered the scandal that had rocked the school in May of 1866. 'The six gold sovereigns that were stolen from Dr Offerton,' he said wonderingly. 'Micky was the thief?'

'Yes. And Peter knew. When I ducked him I was trying to frighten him into silence. I never thought . . .'

'That Micky would kill him.'

'And all these years he's let me think it was my fault.'

Hugh was tempted to say, 'Now that you know what he's like, forget about the Santamaria harbour.' But he had to be careful not to overplay his hand. Edward should draw his own conclusions. Hugh stood up to go. 'I'm sorry to have given you such a blow,' he said.

Edward said nothing. He seemed to have forgotten Hugh's existence. He was staring into his glass. Hugh looked hard at him and saw, with a jolt, that he was crying. He went out quietly and closed the door.

## OCTOBER

Micky Miranda was worried. He sat in the lounge of the Cowes Club smoking a cigar, wondering what he had done to offend Edward. Edward was avoiding him. Micky had not seen him for a week. This had not happened in over twenty years. Every now and again Edward would take offence at something Micky did and go into a sulk, but it never lasted more than a day or two. This time it was serious—and that meant it could jeopardise the Santamaria harbour money.

In the last decade, Pilasters Bank had issued Cordovan bonds about once a year. Some of the money had been capital for railways, waterworks and mines; some had been simple loans to the government. Micky had taken a commission on everything and he was now

personally very rich. More significantly, his ability to raise the money had made him the unquestioned heir to his father's power.

And Papa was about to start a revolution.

The plans were laid. The Miranda army would dash south by rail and lay siege to the capital. But revolutions cost money. Papa had instructed Micky to raise the biggest loan yet, two million pounds sterling, to finance a civil war. And Papa had promised a matchless reward. When Papa was President, Micky would be Prime Minister, with authority over everyone except Papa himself. And he would become President when Papa died. It was everything he had ever wanted. And now it had been put at risk by Edward.

While Micky sat smoking and worrying, he spotted Hugh Pilaster. Micky did not like Hugh and he knew the feeling was mutual. However, Hugh might know what was going on. And Micky had nothing to lose by asking him. He went over to Hugh's table. 'Evening, Pilaster,' he said.

'Evening, Miranda.'

'Have you seen your cousin Edward lately? He seems to have vanished.'

'He comes to the bank every day.'

'Ah.' Micky hesitated. Then, in a lower voice he said, 'Would you happen to know whether I've offended him?'

Hugh looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, 'I can't think of any reason why I shouldn't tell you. Edward has discovered that you killed Peter Middleton, and you've been lying to him about it for twenty-four years.'

How the devil had that come out? Micky wondered. He almost asked the question, then remembered he could not without admitting guilt. He feigned anger and stood up abruptly. 'I shall forget you ever said that,' he said, and left.

It took him only a few moments to realise that he was in no more danger than he had ever been. No one could prove what he had done. The real danger he faced was that Edward would refuse to raise the two million pounds Papa needed. He had to win Edward's forgiveness. And to do that he had to see him.

The next day he went to Nellie's at lunchtime, woke April Tilsley, and persuaded her to send Edward a note, promising him 'something special' if he would come to the brothel that night.

Micky took April's best room and booked Edward's current favourite, a slim girl with short dark hair. He instructed her to dress in a man's evening clothes with a top hat, an outfit Edward found sexy. At half past nine in the evening he and Henrietta were waiting



for Edward. Micky was reclining on a velvet sofa, wearing nothing but a silk robe, sipping brandy, with Henrietta beside him.

An hour went by, and then another. Micky began to lose hope. Then, just before midnight, April put her head round the door and said, 'He's arrived.'

Micky's tension mounted. He had allowed Edward to suffer for a quarter of a century under the illusion that he had killed Peter Middleton when in fact Micky had been the guilty one. It was a lot to ask Edward to forgive. But Micky had a plan.

He posed Henrietta on the sofa, turned the gaslights down low, then sat on the bed, behind the door.

A few moments later Edward came in. In the dim light he did not recognise Henrietta, and said, 'Hello—who are you?'

She said, 'Hello, Edward.'

'Oh, it's you,' he said. He shut the door and came inside. 'Well, what's the "something special" April has been talking about?'

'It's me,' Micky said, and stood up.

'I don't wish to see you,' Edward said, and turned to the door.

Micky stood in his way. 'At least tell me why.'

'I've found out the truth about Peter Middleton.'

Micky nodded. 'Will you give me a chance to explain?'

'What is there to explain?'

'Sit down, just for a minute, by Henrietta, and let me speak.'

Edward hesitated.

Micky said, 'Please?'

Edward sat on the sofa. Henrietta moved close to him and took his arm. Micky sat on the opposite sofa. 'I was wrong,' he began. 'But I was sixteen years old, and we've been best friends for most of our lives. Are you going to throw that away for a schoolboy peccadillo?'

'But you could have told me the truth at any time in the last twenty-four years!' Edward said indignantly.

'I could have, and I should have, but it would have ruined our friendship.'

'Not necessarily,' Edward said.

'Well, it has now . . . hasn't it?'

'Yes,' Edward said, but there was uncertainty in his voice.

Micky realised the time had come to go all out. He stood up. 'Leave us, Henrietta,' he said.

She looked startled, but she got up and went out.

Edward stared at Micky. 'Why did you do that?' he said.

'What do we need her for?' Micky replied. He put out a tentative hand and touched Edward's hair. 'We're better off without her . . .'

Edward swallowed hard and said nothing.

'Aren't we?' Micky persisted.

At last Edward replied. 'Yes,' he whispered. 'Yes.'

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, Micky spread out the plan for Santamaria harbour on the big table in the partners' room at Pilasters Bank. The drawing showed a new port on the Atlantic coast of Cordova, with ship-repair facilities and a rail link. None of it would ever be built, of course. The two million pounds would go straight into the Miranda war chest. But the survey was genuine, and if it had been an honest proposal it might even have made money.

While Micky explained it to the partners, talking of building materials and labour costs, he struggled to appear calm. His entire future depended on the decision made in this room today.

Edward was enthusiastic. He and Micky were the best of friends again, and this was his first major project as senior partner. As anticipated, the opposition came from Hugh. 'I've been looking at what has happened to the last few South American issues we've handled,' he said, and he handed round copies of a table. Micky studied the table while Hugh continued. 'The interest rate offered has gone up from six per cent to seven and a half per cent. Despite that, the number of bonds unsold has been higher each time.'

Micky knew enough about finance to understand what that meant: investors were finding South American bonds less and less attractive.

Hugh went on: 'Also, in the last three issues, the bank has been obliged to buy bonds in the open market to keep the price up. As a result, we now hold almost a million pounds' worth of Cordovan bonds. Our bank is gravely overexposed to that one sector.'

For a few seconds no one spoke. Edward looked angry, but he was restraining himself, knowing it would appear better if one of the other partners contradicted Hugh. At last Sir Harry said, 'Point taken, Hugh, but I think you may be overstating the case a little.'

George Hartshorn concurred. 'The plan is sound and the profits considerable. I think we should accept.'

Samuel spoke next. 'I understand that you're reluctant to veto the first major proposal brought in by a new senior partner,' he said. 'And you may not be inclined to place much reliance on the views of two partners who have announced their resignations. But I've been in the business twice as long as anyone in this room, and Hugh is probably the most successful young banker in the world, and we both feel this project is dangerous. Don't let personal considerations lead you to dismiss that advice out of hand.'

Samuel was eloquent, Micky thought, but his position had been known in advance. Everyone now looked at Young William.

At last he spoke.

'South American bonds have always seemed risky,' he began. 'If we had allowed ourselves to be frightened of them we would have missed out on a great deal of profitable business.' This sounded good, Micky thought. William went on: 'Cordova has gone from strength to strength under President Garcia. I believe we can anticipate increasing profits from our business there in future. We should be looking for more such business, not less.'

Micky let his breath out in a long, silent sigh of relief. He had won.

'Just a minute,' said Hugh. 'Let me ask Edward something. Are you confident that we can sell most of this issue?'

'Yes, if we price it right,' Edward said.

'Then why don't we sell the bonds on a commission basis, rather than underwriting the issue.'

Micky muffled a curse. That was not what he wanted. Normally, when the bank launched, say, a million pounds' worth of bonds, it agreed to buy any unsold bonds itself, thereby guaranteeing that the borrower would receive the full million. In return for that guarantee, the bank took a fat percentage. The alternative method was to offer the bonds for sale with no guarantee. The bank took no risk and received a much lower percentage, but if only ten thousand of the million bonds were sold, the borrower would get only ten thousand pounds. The risk remained with the borrower—and at this stage Micky did not want any risks. Hugh had been cunning, he thought despondently. If he had continued to oppose the scheme outright, he would have been overruled. But he had suggested a way of reducing the risk. Bankers loved to reduce their risks.

Sir Harry said, 'If we do sell them all, we still make about sixty thousand pounds, even at the reduced commission. And if we don't sell them all we shall have avoided a considerable loss.'

There was a general murmur of assent.

In desperation, Micky said, 'I can't promise that my principals will agree to that. In the past the bank has always underwritten Cordovan bonds. If you decide to change your policy . . .' He hesitated. 'I may have to go to another bank.'

William was offended. 'That's your privilege.'

Micky saw that his empty threat had only served to consolidate the opposition. Hastily he added, 'The leaders of my country value their relationship with Pilasters and would not wish to jeopardise that.' He began to roll up the map of the harbour. He had been defeated, but

he was not ready to give up. That two million pounds was the key to the presidency of his country. He had to have it.

He would think of something.

EDWARD AND MICKY had arranged a celebration lunch in the dining room of the Cowes Club. But now they had nothing to celebrate. By the time Edward arrived, Micky had decided his only chance was to persuade Edward to go against the decision of the partners, and underwrite the bonds without telling them.

They ordered lunch, and when the waiter had left, Edward said, 'I've been thinking that I might get a place of my own.'

'But why? You've got everything you need at your mother's.'

'Everything but privacy.'

Micky began to see what he was driving at. 'You don't want your mother to know everything you do . . .'

'You might want to stay with me overnight, for example.'

Micky suddenly saw how he could exploit this idea. He feigned sadness and shook his head. 'By the time you get the house I shall probably have left London.'

Edward was devastated. 'What the devil do you mean?'

'If I don't raise the money for the new harbour, I'll be recalled.'

'You can't go back!' Edward said in a frightened voice.

'I certainly don't want to. But I may not have the choice.'

'The bonds will sell out, I'm sure,' Edward said. He hit the table with his fist, making the glasses shake. 'I wish Hugh had let me underwrite the issue!'

Micky said nervously, 'I suppose you have to abide by the decision.'

'Of course—what else?'

'Well . . .' He hesitated. 'You couldn't just have Oliver draw up an underwriting deal, without telling anyone, could you?'

'I could, I suppose,' Edward said worriedly.

'It might make the difference between my staying in London and my being recalled to Cordova.'

The waiter brought their wine and poured them each a glass.

Edward said, 'It would all come out, eventually.'

'By then it will be too late. And you can pass it off as a clerical error.' This was implausible and Micky doubted if Edward would swallow it.

But Edward ignored it. 'If it means you'll stay, I'll speak to Simon this afternoon.'

Micky picked up his wineglass. 'To friendship,' he said.

Edward clinked glasses and smiled shyly. 'To friendship.'

WITHOUT WARNING, EMILY left Leicestershire and moved into Augusta's house. In fact Emily was technically mistress of the house, and Augusta just a mother-in-law living there on sufferance, because Joseph had bequeathed it to Edward. 'It is your home,' Emily would say sweetly. 'You must do whatever you wish.'

Emily's friends would call in the afternoon. Tea was a ritual presided over by the mistress of the house. Emily would smile sweetly and beg Augusta to take charge. One crass guest had even remarked how kind Emily was to defer to her mother-in-law in that way.

Augusta had been outmanoeuvred, a new experience for her. Normally she held over people's heads the ultimate deterrent of expulsion from the circle of her favour. But expulsion was what Emily wanted and that made her impossible to frighten. Augusta became all the more determined not to give in.

People began to invite Edward and Emily to social functions. Emily would go, whether Edward accompanied her or not. Augusta could not allow her son churlishly to decline invitations from the very best people. So she forced him to go.

Tonight Edward and Emily were going to a dinner party, and so was Augusta. But when Augusta came downstairs in her black silk gown she found Micky Miranda drinking whisky in the drawing room. She sat on the Egyptian sofa, intending that he should sit beside her, but to her disappointment he sat opposite. Feeling spurned, she said, 'What are you here for?'

'Edward and I are going to a prize fight.'

'No, you're not. He's dining with the Marquis of Hocastle. You'd better go on your own.'

A rebellious look came into his eye, but he stood up slowly. It was too late. Edward came in, rubbing his hands in anticipation. 'I'm looking forward to this,' he said.

Augusta said in her most authoritative voice, 'Edward, you cannot go to the prize fight. You know perfectly well that we are engaged to dine with the Marquis of Hocastle.'

'But I dined out with Emily last night.'

'Then tonight will make two civilised dinners in a row.'

'Emily can go to the—' He caught Augusta's look and stopped short. 'I want to see the fight,' he said.

'You may not go!'

At that moment Emily came in. She could not help but notice the charged atmosphere and said immediately, 'What's wrong?'

Edward said, 'Go and fetch that blasted bit of paper you're always asking me to sign!'



Emily went out and came back with a legal-looking document. Edward sat at a table, selected a quill, and dipped its point into an inkwell. Augusta was horrified—and she realised with sudden rage that Emily had planned this. Her aim had been to irritate Edward so much that he would agree to the annulment just to be rid of her. A feeling of panic came over her. Edward put pen to paper.

Augusta felt old, defeated and alone.

THE ISSUE OF TWO million pounds' worth of Santamaria harbour bonds was a worse flop than Hugh had feared. By the deadline Pilasters had sold only four hundred thousand pounds' worth, and the next day the price fell. Hugh was glad he had forced Edward to sell the bonds on commission.

On the following Monday morning Jonas Mulberry brought the partners a summary of the previous week's business. Before the man had left the room Hugh noticed a discrepancy. 'Just a minute, Mulberry,' he said. 'This can't be right.' There was a huge fall in cash on deposit. 'There hasn't been a big withdrawal, has there?'

'Not that I know of, Mr Hugh,' said Mulberry.

Hugh looked round the room. All the partners were there except Edward. 'Does anyone recall a big withdrawal last week?'

Nobody did.

Hugh stood up. 'Let's check,' he said to Mulberry.

They went up the stairs to the senior clerks' room.

Hugh sat at a table and said to Mulberry, 'Find me the interbank book, please.'

Mulberry pulled a ledger from a shelf and set it in front of him. Another clerk piped up, 'Is there anything that I can do to assist, Mr Hugh? I keep that ledger.'

Hugh said, 'You're Clemmow, aren't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What big withdrawals were there last week—a million pounds or more?'

'Only one,' the clerk said. 'The Santamaria Harbour Company withdrew one million, eight hundred thousand.'

Hugh shot to his feet. 'But they only raised four hundred thousand!'

Clemmow turned pale. 'The issue was two million pounds—'

'But it wasn't underwritten, it was a commission sale!' Hugh shouted. The clerks in the room stared at him. 'Show me the ledger!'

There were only three entries: a credit of two million pounds, a debit of two hundred thousand pounds commission, and a transfer to

another bank of the balance. Hugh was livid. The money was gone. If it had simply been credited to the account in error, the mistake could be rectified. But the money had been withdrawn the next day. That suggested a carefully planned fraud. 'Someone is going to jail for this,' he said wrathfully. 'Who wrote these entries?'

'I did, sir,' said Clemmow.

'On whose instructions?'

'Mr Oliver's.'

Simon Oliver, the cousin of Micky Miranda. Hugh instantly suspected he was behind the fraud. 'Find Mr Oliver and bring him to the partners' room,' Hugh said to Mulberry. He would continue the investigation there, with the other partners. Before he was out of the room a buzz of excited conversation broke out among the clerks.

Hugh returned to the partners' room. 'There's been a major fraud,' he said grimly. 'The Santamaria Harbour Company has been paid the full amount of the bond issue though we only sold four hundred thousand.'

They were all horrified. 'How the devil did it happen?' said William.

'I think it was done by Simon Oliver, Edward's clerk. I've sent for him, but my guess is the swine is on a ship headed for Cordova.'

To Hugh's surprise, when Mulberry came in he was accompanied by Simon Oliver. He had a thick contract in his hand.

Without preamble Oliver said, 'The Santamaria issue was underwritten—the contract says so.' He held the document out.

Hugh said, 'These bonds were to be sold on a commission basis.'

'Mr Edward told me to draw up an underwriting contract.'

'Can you prove it?'

'Yes!' He gave Hugh another sheet of paper. It was in Edward's handwriting and it quite clearly said that the loan was to be underwritten. That settled it. Edward was responsible. There had been no fraud. The whole transaction was perfectly legitimate.

'All right, Oliver, you can go,' Hugh said.

Hugh looked at his partners. 'Edward went against our decision,' he said bitterly. 'And it has cost us one million, four hundred thousand pounds.'

Samuel sat down heavily. 'How dreadful,' he said.

William said, 'Are we bankrupt?'

Hugh reflected for a moment. 'Technically, no,' he said. 'Although our cash reserve has gone down, the bonds appear on the other side of our balance sheet, valued at nearly their purchase price. Our assets match our liabilities, so we're solvent.'

Samuel added, 'As long as the price doesn't collapse.'

‘Indeed. If something happened to cause a fall in South American bonds we would be in deep trouble.’

Jonas Mulberry interjected a practical question. ‘What about our liquidity, Mr Hugh? We’ll need a large deposit before the end of the week to meet routine withdrawals. We can’t sell the harbour bonds—it would depress the price.’

That was a thought. Hugh worried at the problem for a moment, then said, ‘I’ll borrow a million from the Colonial Bank. Old Cunliffe will keep it quiet. That should tide us over.’

William said, ‘What about Edward?’

Hugh knew what Edward had to do: resign. But he wanted someone else to say it, so he remained silent. Eventually Samuel said, ‘Edward must resign. None of us could ever trust him again.’

William said, ‘He may withdraw his capital.’

‘He can’t,’ Hugh said. ‘We haven’t got the cash.’

Sir Harry said, ‘Then who will be senior partner?’

There was a moment of silence. Samuel broke it by saying, ‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, can there be any question? Who uncovered Edward’s deceit? Who have you all looked to for guidance? You *know* who the new senior partner must be.’

Hugh was taken by surprise. Slowly it dawned on him that he was about to achieve his life’s ambition: he was going to be senior partner of Pilasters Bank. He looked at William. ‘What do you think?’

He hesitated only for a second. ‘I think you should be senior partner, Hugh,’ he said.

‘Major Hartshorn?’

‘I agree.’

‘Sir Harry?’

‘Certainly—and I hope you’ll accept.’

It was done. Hugh took a deep breath. ‘Thank you for your confidence. I hope I can bring us through this calamity with our reputation and our fortunes intact.’

At that moment Edward came in. There was a dismayed silence. They had been discussing him almost as if he were dead, and it was a shock to see him in the room.

‘This place is in turmoil,’ he said. ‘Clerks whispering in the corridors, hardly anyone doing any work—what’s going on?’

Nobody spoke.

Consternation spread over his face. ‘What’s wrong?’ he said, but his expression told Hugh that he could guess. ‘You’d better tell me,’ he persisted. ‘After all, I am the senior partner.’

‘No, you’re not,’ said Hugh. ‘I am.’

## NOVEMBER

Miss Dorothy Pilaster married Viscount Nicholas Ipswich at the Kensington Methodist Hall on a cold, bright morning in November. Afterwards a lunch was served to three hundred guests in a vast heated tent in the garden of Hugh's house.

Hugh was very happy. His sister was radiantly beautiful and her new husband was charming to everyone. But the happiest person there was Hugh's mother. Smiling beatifically, she sat beside the groom's father, the Duke of Norwich. For the first time in twenty-four years she was not wearing black: she had on a blue-grey cashmere outfit that set off her thick silver hair and calm grey eyes. 'I used to think I had been unlucky,' she murmured to Hugh in between courses. 'I was wrong.' She put her hand on his arm in a gesture like a blessing. 'I'm very fortunate.' It made Hugh want to cry.

He took a sip of Château Margaux, his favourite red wine. It was a lavish wedding, and Hugh was glad he could afford it. But he also felt a twinge of guilt about spending all that money when Pilasters Bank was so weak. It was going to take him at least a year to strengthen the balance sheet. However, he had steered the bank through the immediate crisis, and they now had enough cash to meet normal withdrawals for the foreseeable future. They were safe from everything except some unexpected catastrophe. On balance he felt he was entitled to give his only sister an expensive wedding.

Looking around, he noticed one guest who was not happy: Aunt Augusta. Augusta was seething at the spectacle she had been forced to attend. Hugh Pilaster, son of bankrupt Tobias, giving Château Margaux to three hundred guests. Whereas her son, dear Teddy, the offspring of the great Joseph Pilaster, had been summarily dismissed as senior partner and was soon to have his marriage annulled.

There were no rules any more! Anyone could enter society. As if to prove the point she caught sight of the greatest parvenue of them all: Mrs Solly Greenbourne, formerly Maisie Robinson. It was amazing that Hugh had the gall to invite her, a woman whose whole life had been scandal. But there she was, sitting at the next table in a dress the colour of a new copper penny, chatting earnestly to the governor of the Bank of England. She was probably talking about unmarried mothers. And he was listening! A footman came to Hugh's side and said quietly, 'Mr Mulberry from the bank is on the telephone, sir.'

Mulberry knew Hugh was in the middle of a wedding. He would not telephone unless something was wrong. He stood up. 'Please excuse me, Mother—something I have to attend to.'

He hurried across the lawn and into the house. The telephone was in his library. He picked it up and said, 'Hugh Pilaster speaking.'

'It's Mulberry, sir. I'm sorry to—'

'What's happened?'

'A telegram from New York. Civil war has broken out in Cordova. The Miranda family has attacked the capital city, Palma.'

Hugh's heart was racing. 'Any indication of how strong they are?' If the rebellion could be crushed quickly there was still hope.

'President Garcia has fled. There's another cable from our Cordova office, but it's still being decoded.'

'Telephone again as soon as it's ready.'

'Very good, sir.'

Hugh cranked the machine, got the operator, and gave the name of the bank's stockbroker. He waited while the man was called to the telephone. 'Danby, this is Hugh Pilaster. What's happening to Cordovan bonds?'

'We're offering them at half-par and getting no takers.'

Half-price, Hugh thought. Pilasters was already bankrupt. Despair filled his heart. 'What will they fall to?'

'Zero, I should think. No one pays interest in the middle of a war.'

Zero. Pilasters had just lost two and a half million pounds. There was no hope now of gradually returning the balance sheet to strength.

'I say, Pilaster, your bank will be all right, won't it?'

Hugh hesitated. He hated to tell lies. But the truth would destroy the bank. 'We've got more Cordovan bonds than I'd like, Danby. But we've got a lot of other assets as well. And now I must get back to my guests.' Hugh had no intention of going back to his guests, but he wanted to give an impression of calm. 'My sister got married this morning.'

'So I heard. Congratulations.'

'Goodbye.'

Before he could ask for another number, Mulberry called again. 'Mr Cunliffe from the Colonial Bank is here, sir,' he said. 'He is asking for repayment of the loan.'

'Damn him,' Hugh said fervently. He knew Cunliffe was only the first. Tomorrow morning depositors would be queuing outside the doors, wanting cash. And Hugh would not be able to pay them. 'Tell Mr Cunliffe that you have been unable to get authorisation to sign the cheque, because all the partners are at the wedding,' he said.



'Very good, Mr Hugh.'

'And then . . .'

'Yes, sir?'

Hugh paused. He hated to say the dreadful words. He shut his eyes. Better get it over with. 'And then, Mulberry, you must close the doors of the bank.'

Hugh put down the phone. Staring at the bookshelves of his library, he saw instead the grand façade of Pilasters Bank, and imagined the closing of the ornate iron doors. Pilasters had crashed.

Hugh buried his face in his hands.

'WE ARE ALL absolutely penniless,' said Hugh.

They did not understand, at first. He could tell by their faces. They had gathered in the drawing room of his house. It was a cluttered room, decorated by Nora, who loved to crowd every surface with ornaments. The guests had gone, at last—Hugh had not told anyone the bad news until the party was over—but the family were still in their wedding finery. Augusta sat with Edward, both of them wearing scornful, disbelieving expressions. Uncle Samuel sat next to Hugh. The other partners, Young William, Major Hartshorn and Sir Harry, stood behind a sofa on which sat their wives Beatrice, Madeleine and Clementine. Nora, flushed from lunch and champagne, sat in her usual chair beside the fire. The bride and groom, Nick and Dotty, held hands, looking frightened.

Hugh felt most sorry for the newlyweds. 'Dotty's dowry is gone, Nick. I'm afraid all our plans have come to nothing.'

Augusta stood up and went to the fireplace. 'We must salvage what we can. There must be quite a lot of cash in the bank still,' she said. 'We must hide it before the creditors move in. Then—'

Hugh interrupted her. 'We'll do no such thing,' he said sharply. 'It's not our money.'

'Of course it's our money!' she cried.

'Be quiet and sit down, Augusta, or I'll have you thrown out.'

She was sufficiently surprised to shut up, but she did not sit down.

Hugh said, 'There is cash at the bank, and as we have not officially been declared bankrupt, we can choose to pay some of our creditors. You'll all have to dismiss your servants; if you send them to the side door of the bank with a note of how much they are owed I will pay them off.'

'Who are you to tell me to dismiss my servants?' Augusta said indignantly.

Hugh was prepared to feel sympathy for their plight, but this

deliberate obtuseness was very wearying, and he snapped at her. 'If you don't dismiss them they will leave anyway, because they won't get paid. Try to understand that *you haven't got any money.*'

'Ridiculous,' she muttered.

'I can't dismiss our servants,' Nora said. 'It's not possible to live in a house like this with no servants.'

'That need not trouble you,' Hugh said. 'You won't be living in a house like this. I have to sell it. We will all have to sell our houses.'

'This is absurd!' Augusta cried. 'I have absolutely no intention of moving, and I imagine the rest of the family feel the same.' She looked at her sister-in-law. 'Madeleine?'

'Quite right, Augusta,' said Madeleine. 'George and I will stay where we are. All this is foolishness. We can't possibly be destitute.'

Hugh despised them. In the end they would have to give up their illusion. But if they tried to cling to wealth that was no longer theirs, they would destroy the family's reputation as well as its fortune.

Augusta turned to her daughter. 'Clementine, I'm sure you and Harry will take the same view as Madeleine and George.'

Clementine said, 'No, Mother.'

Augusta gasped. Hugh was equally startled. It was not like his cousin Clementine to go against her mother.

Clementine said, 'It was listening to you that got us into this trouble. If we had made Hugh senior partner, instead of Edward, we would all still be as rich as Croesus. You were wrong, Mother, and you've ruined us. Hugh was right, and we had better let him do all he can to guide us through this dreadful disaster.'

William said, 'Quite right, Clementine.'

The battle lines were drawn. On Hugh's side were William, Samuel, and Clementine, who ruled her husband Sir Harry. Against him were Augusta, Edward, and Madeleine, who spoke for Major Hartshorn.

Then Nora said defiantly, 'You'll have to carry me out of this house.'

There was a bitter taste in Hugh's mouth. His own wife was joining the enemy. 'You're the only person in the room who has gone against their husband or wife,' he said sadly. 'Don't you owe me any loyalty at all?'

She tossed her head. 'I didn't marry you to live in poverty.'

'All the same you *will* leave this house,' he said grimly.

WHEN THEY HAD GONE Hugh sat staring into the fire, racking his brains for some way to pay the bank's creditors.

The idea of Pilasters in formal bankruptcy was too painful to

contemplate. All his life he had lived under the shadow of his father's bankruptcy. In his heart of hearts he feared that if he suffered the same fate, he too might be driven to take his own life. As the afternoon faded into twilight, the outlines of a plan began to form in his mind, and he allowed himself the faintest glimmer of hope.

At six o'clock he went to see Ben Greenbourne.

Greenbourne was past seventy, but still fit, and he continued to run the business. Hugh called at the mansion in Piccadilly and was shown into the library. In this room he had learned that Bertie was his son.

The old man appeared fifteen minutes later, and apologised for keeping Hugh waiting. 'A domestic problem detained me.' He did not say what the domestic problem was and Hugh did not ask.

'You know that Cordovan bonds have crashed,' Hugh said, 'and that my bank has closed its doors as a result.'

'Yes. I am very sorry.'

'It's twenty-four years since the last time an English bank failed.'

'That was Overend and Gurney. I remember it well.'

'So do I. My father went broke and hanged himself in his office in Leadenhall Street.'

Greenbourne was embarrassed. 'I am most terribly sorry, Pilaster. That dreadful fact had slipped my mind.'

'A lot of firms went down in that crisis. But much worse will happen tomorrow. In the last quarter of a century the business done in the City has increased tenfold and we are all more closely intertwined than ever. Next week *dozens* of banks will fail, hundreds of businesses will close, and thousands upon thousands of people will find themselves destitute—unless we take action to prevent it.'

'Action?' said Greenbourne with more than a hint of irritation. 'Your only remedy is to pay your debts; you cannot do so; therefore you are helpless.'

'Alone, yes, I'm helpless. But suppose a syndicate of bankers was formed to take over Pilasters. The syndicate would guarantee to pay any creditor on demand. At the same time, it would begin to liquidate Pilasters' assets in an orderly fashion.'

Suddenly Greenbourne was interested. 'I see. If the members of the syndicate were sufficiently respected, their guarantee might be enough to reassure everyone, and creditors might not demand their cash immediately. With luck, the flow of money coming in from the sale of assets might cover the payments to creditors.'

'And a dreadful crisis would be averted.'

Greenbourne shook his head. 'But in the end, the syndicate would lose money, for Pilasters' liabilities are greater than its assets.'

'Not necessarily.'

'How so?'

'We have more than two million pounds' worth of Cordovan bonds which are today valued at nothing. But they may not be worthless for ever. The rebels may be defeated. Or the new government may resume interest payments. If the bonds came up to just half their previous level, the syndicate would break even. But the plan depends on you. If you agree to head the syndicate, the City will follow your lead. If not, it will not have the prestige to reassure creditors. Will you do it?' Hugh held his breath.

The old man was silent for several seconds, thinking, then he said firmly, 'No, I won't.'

Hugh slumped in his chair. It was his last shot and it had failed.

Greenbourne said, 'All my life I have been cautious. Where other men see high profits, I see high risks, and I resist the temptation. Your uncle Joseph was not like me. He would take the risk—and he pocketed the profits. His son Edward was worse. The Pilasters must pay the price for their years of high profits. I didn't take those profits—why should I pay your debts?'

Hugh had wondered, before coming here, whether to tell him that Micky Miranda had murdered Solly. Now he considered it again, but he came to the same conclusion: it would shock and distress the old man but it would do nothing to persuade him to rescue Pilasters. He was casting about for some last attempt to change Greenbourne's mind when the butler came in and said, 'Pardon me, Mr Greenbourne, but you asked to be called the moment the detective arrived.'

Greenbourne stood up immediately, looking agitated. 'I'm sorry, Pilaster, but I must leave you. My granddaughter Rebecca has . . . disappeared . . . and we are all distraught.'

'I'm so sorry to hear that,' Hugh said. He knew Solly's sister Kate, and he had a vague memory of her daughter, a pretty dark-haired girl. 'I hope you find her safe and well.'

The old man went out, leaving Hugh amid the ruins of his hopes.

MAISIE SOMETIMES WONDERED if there was something infectious about going into labour. It often happened, in a ward full of pregnant women, that as soon as one started labour the others would follow within hours. It had been like that today. It had started at four o'clock in the morning and they had been delivering babies ever since. By seven o'clock, however, it was all over, and Maisie was enjoying a cup of tea with Rachel and Dan when Hugh Pilaster came in. 'I bring very bad news,' he said right away.

Maisie was pouring tea but his tone of voice shocked her and she stopped. Looking hard at his face she saw he was grief-stricken, and she thought someone must have died. 'Hugh, what has happened?'

'You keep all the hospital's money in my bank, don't you?'

If it was only money, Maisie thought, the news could not be that bad.

Rachel answered Hugh's question. 'Yes. My father handles it.'

'And he invested your money in Cordovan bonds.'

'Did he?'

Maisie said, 'What's wrong, Hugh? For goodness' sake tell us!'

'The bank has failed.'

Maisie's eyes filled with tears, not for herself but for him. 'Oh, Hugh!' she cried. She knew how much he was hurting.

'All your money is gone,' he said. 'You'll probably have to close the hospital. I can't tell you how sorry I am.'

Rachel was white with shock. 'How can our money be gone?'

Dan answered her. 'The bank can't pay its debts,' he said bitterly. 'That's what bankruptcy means, it means you owe people money and you can't pay them.'

In a flash of recollection Maisie saw her father, looking much as Dan did today, saying exactly the same thing about bankruptcy.

Dan put his arm round Rachel but she would not be consoled. 'And what is going to happen to the women who come here for help?'

'I would gladly give you the money out of my own pocket,' Hugh said. 'But I've lost everything too.'

'Surely something can be done?' she persisted.

'I did try. I asked Ben Greenbourne to help, but he refused. He has troubles of his own, poor man: his granddaughter Rebecca is missing. Anyway, without his support nothing can be done.'

Maisie's heart was full. She was dismayed at the prospect of closing the hospital, but most of all she ached for Hugh.

When he had gone she made a tour of the wards. She saw everything with new eyes. She remembered the superhuman efforts that had been required of her and Rachel to get the hospital opened, and she consoled herself with the thought that for eleven years they had given comfort to hundreds of women. But she had wanted to make a permanent change. She had seen this as the first of dozens of female hospitals all over the country. In that she had failed.

She spoke to each of the women who had given birth today. The only one she was worried about was Miss Nobody. She was a slight figure and her baby had been very small. Maisie guessed she had been starving herself to conceal her pregnancy from her family. She sat



down on the edge of her bed. The new mother was nursing her child, a girl. 'Isn't she beautiful?' she said.

Maisie nodded. 'She's got black hair, just like yours.' She reached out and stroked the tiny head. Like all babies, this one looked like Solly. In fact—

Maisie was jolted by a sudden revelation.

'Oh, my goodness,' she said. 'You're Ben Greenbourne's granddaughter Rebecca, aren't you?'

The girl's eyes widened. 'How did you know? You haven't seen me since I was six years old!'

'But I knew Kate, your mother. I was married to her brother, after all. And I remember you as a baby. You had black hair, just like your daughter.'

Rebecca was scared. 'Promise you won't tell them?'

'I promise I won't do anything without your consent. But I think you ought to send word to your family. Your grandfather is distraught.'

'He's the one I'm frightened of.'

Maisie nodded. 'I can understand why. He's a hardhearted old curmudgeon, as I know from personal experience. But if you let me talk to him I think I can make him see sense.'

'Would you?' said Rebecca in a voice full of youthful optimism.

'Of course,' Maisie said.

Rebecca looked down. Her baby's eyes had closed and she had stopped sucking. 'She's asleep,' Rebecca said.

Maisie smiled. 'Have you chosen a name for her yet?'

'Oh, yes,' Rebecca said. 'I'm going to call her Maisie.'

BEN GREENBOURNE'S FACE was wet with tears as he came out of the ward. 'I've left her with Kate for a while,' he said in a choked voice. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed ineffectually at his cheeks. Maisie had never seen her father-in-law lose his self-possession. She felt it would do him good.

'All those young women,' the old man said. 'Are they all in the same position as Rebecca?'

'Not all,' Maisie said. 'Some are widows. Some have been abandoned by their husbands. Quite a lot have run away from men who beat them. But most of our women are like Rebecca, girls who have simply made a stupid mistake.'

'I didn't think life had much more to teach me,' he said. 'Now I find I have been foolish and ignorant. If you weren't here, where would these poor girls go?'

'They would have their babies in ditches and alleyways,' Maisie said.

'To think that might have happened to Rebecca.'

'Unfortunately the hospital has to close,' Maisie said.

'Why is that?'

She looked him in the eye. 'All our money was in Pilasters Bank,' she said. 'Now we are penniless.'

'Is that so?' he said, and he looked very thoughtful.

HUGH UNDRESSED FOR BED but he felt far from sleep. He went over and over the bank's situation in his mind, but he could think of no way to ameliorate it. At midnight he heard a loud, determined knocking at the front door. He went downstairs in his nightclothes to answer it. There was a liveried footman on the doorstep. The man said, 'I beg pardon for knocking so late, sir, but the message is urgent.' He handed over an envelope and left.

Hugh opened the envelope and saw the neat, old-fashioned writing of a fussy elderly man. The words made his heart leap with joy.

*Dear Pilaster,*

*On further reflection I have decided to consent to your proposal. Yours, etc.*

*B. Greenbourne.*

He looked up from the letter and grinned at the empty hall. 'Well, I'll be blown,' he said delightedly. 'I wonder what made the old man change his mind?'

## DECEMBER

The Pilaster crash was the society scandal of the year. The cheap newspapers reported every development breathlessly: the sale of the great Kensington mansions; the auctions of the paintings, antique furniture and cases of port; the modest suburban houses where the proud and mighty Pilasters now peeled potatoes and washed their own undergarments.

Hugh and Nora rented a small house with a garden in Chingford, a village nine miles from London. They left their servants behind. Nora, who had not done housework for twelve years, took it very badly, and shuffled about in a grubby apron, complaining constantly.

Each partner received a small monthly allowance from the bank. In theory they were not entitled to anything. But the syndicate members were bankers, and in their hearts they thought, There but for the grace of God go I. Besides, the cooperation of the partners was helpful in selling off the assets, and it was worth a small payment to retain their goodwill.

Hugh followed the civil war in Cordova anxiously. The outcome would determine how much money the syndicate would lose. Hugh badly wanted them to make a profit. He wanted one day to be able to say that no one had lost money rescuing Pilasters Bank. But the possibility seemed remote.

At first the Miranda faction seemed set to win the war. President Garcia had fled the capital and taken refuge in the fortified city of Campanario, in the south, his home region. But then came an unexpected development. Tonio's family, the Silvas, joined the President's side, in return for promises of free elections when he regained control. Now the forces were evenly balanced. So were the financial resources: the north had nitrate mines and the south had silver, but neither side could get its exports financed or insured. Both appealed to the British government for recognition, in the hope that it would help them get credit. But so far the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, refused to favour either side.

Then Tonio Silva arrived in London.

He turned up at Hugh's suburban home on Christmas Eve. Hugh was in the kitchen, giving the boys hot milk and buttered toast for breakfast. Nora was getting dressed: she was going into London to do her Christmas shopping, although she would have very little money to spend. Hugh had agreed to stay at home and take care of the boys.

Tonio had grown a beard and moustache, no doubt to hide the scars of the beating he had been given by Micky's thugs eleven years earlier; but Hugh instantly recognised the carrot-coloured hair. It was snowing, and there was a dusting of white on Tonio's hat and the shoulders of his coat. Hugh took his old friend into the kitchen and gave him tea. 'How did you find me?' he asked.

'It wasn't easy,' Tonio replied. 'There was no one at your old house and the bank was closed. But I went to your aunt Augusta's. She didn't know your address, but she remembered Chingford. The way she said the name, it sounded like a prison camp.'

Hugh nodded. 'It's not so bad. The boys are fine.'

'Augusta hasn't moved house?'

'No. She refuses to accept reality, but she'll find out that there are worse places than Chingford.'

'Cordova, for instance,' said Tonio. 'My brother was killed in the fighting.'

'I'm sorry.'

'The war has reached a stalemate. Everything depends on the British government now. The side that wins recognition will be able to get credit, resupply its army, and overrun the opposition. That's why I'm here.'

'Have you been sent by President Garcia?'

'Better than that. I am now officially the Cordovan Minister in London. Miranda has been dismissed.'

'Splendid!' Hugh was pleased that Micky had been sacked. It had irked him to see a man who had stolen two million pounds from him walking around London as if nothing had happened.

Tonio added, 'I brought letters of accreditation with me and lodged them at the Foreign Office yesterday. I hope to persuade the Prime Minister to support our side.'

Hugh looked at him quizzically. 'How?'

'Garcia is the legitimate President—Britain ought to support him.'

That was a bit feeble, Hugh thought. 'Lord Salisbury is trying to keep the lid on a boiling cauldron in Ireland—he's got no time for a distant South American civil war.' Hugh did not mean to sound negative, but an idea was forming in his mind.

Tonio said rather irritably, 'Well, all right, what do you think would engage his attention?'

'You could promise to protect British investors.'

'How?'

'I'm not sure, I'm thinking aloud.' Hugh shifted in his chair. Four-year-old Sol was building a castle of wooden blocks around his feet. It was odd to be deciding the future of a whole country here in his tiny kitchen. 'British investors put two million pounds into the Santamaria Harbour Company—Pilasters Bank being the biggest contributor. I have no doubt the entire two million went straight into the Miranda war chest. We need to get it back.'

'But it's all been spent on weapons.'

'But the Miranda family must have assets worth millions.'

'Indeed—they own the country's nitrate mines.'

'If your side won the war, could President Garcia hand over the mines to the Santamaria Harbour Company, in compensation for the fraud?'

Tonio said firmly, 'I have been told by the President that I can promise *anything* that will get the British on his side.'

Hugh began to feel excited. The prospect of paying off all the

Pilasters' debts seemed closer. 'Let me think,' he said. 'We ought to lay the groundwork before you make your pitch. I believe I could persuade old Ben Greenbourne to put in a good word with Lord Salisbury.' He drummed his fingers on the kitchen table. 'This is beginning to look possible!'

'We should act fast,' Tonio said.

'We'll go into town right away. Greenbourne will be at his country house, but I can telephone from the bank.' Hugh stood up. 'Let me tell Nora.'

She was in the bedroom, putting on an elaborate hat with fur trim. 'I have to go into town,' Hugh said as he put on a collar and tie.

'Who's going to look after the boys, then?' she said.

'You, I hope.'

'No!' she screeched. 'I'm going shopping!'

'I'm sorry, Nora, but you can't have your way about this. I have to speak to Ben Greenbourne urgently.'

'I'm sick of this,' she said disgustedly. 'Sick of this boring village, sick of the children and sick of you. My father lives better than we do!' Nora's father had opened a pub, with a loan from Pilasters Bank, and was doing extremely well. 'I could work for him as a barmaid,' she said, 'and be paid for doing drudgery!'

Hugh stared at her. Suddenly he knew he would never share her bed again. There was nothing left of his marriage. Nora hated him, and he despised her. 'Take your hat off, Nora,' he said. 'You're not going shopping.' He put on his suit jacket and went out.

Tonio was waiting impatiently in the hall. Hugh kissed the boys, picked up his hat and coat and opened the door. 'There's a train in a few minutes,' he said. He shrugged into his coat as they went down the short garden path and out through the gate. It was snowing harder and there was a layer an inch thick on the grass. They hurried along a gravel road towards the village.

The train came into sight as they crossed a bridge over the line. A man was leaning on the parapet, watching the approaching train. As they passed him he turned, and Hugh recognised him: it was Micky Miranda. And he had a revolver in his hand.

After that everything happened quickly. Hugh cried out, but his shout was a whisper compared with the noise of the train. Micky pointed the gun at Tonio and fired at point-blank range. Tonio staggered and fell. Micky turned the gun on Hugh—but as he did so, smoke from the engine billowed over the bridge in a dense cloud, and suddenly they were both blind. Hugh threw himself to the snowy ground. He heard the gun again, twice, but he felt nothing. He rolled



sideways and got to his knees, peering into the fog.

The smoke began to clear. Hugh glimpsed a figure in the mist and rushed at him. Micky saw him and turned, but too late: Hugh cannoned into him. Micky fell and the gun flew from his hand. Micky struggled to his feet, then stooped to pick up his walking cane. Hugh rushed at him again and knocked him down, but Micky kept hold of the cane. As Micky scrambled to his feet again Hugh lashed out at him, but he missed. Micky struck at him with the cane and hit his head. Hugh roared with rage, rushed at Micky and butted his face. They both staggered back, breathing hard.

There was a whistle from the station. The train was leaving. Panic showed on Micky's face. Hugh guessed that he had planned to escape by train, and could not afford to be stuck so close to the scene of his crime until the next one. The guess was right: Micky turned and ran to the station.

Hugh gave chase.

Micky was no sprinter, having spent too many nights drinking in brothels; but Hugh had passed his adult life sitting behind a desk, and he was not in much better shape. Micky ran into the station as the train was pulling out. Hugh followed him. When they charged onto the platform a railwayman shouted, 'Oy! Where's your tickets?'

By way of reply Hugh yelled, 'Murder!'

Micky ran along the platform, trying to catch the receding rear end of the train. Hugh charged after him, ignoring the stabbing pain in his side. The railwayman joined in the chase. Micky caught up with the train, grabbed a handle and jumped on a step. Hugh dived after him, caught him by the ankle and lost his grip. The railwayman tripped over Hugh and went flying. When Hugh got to his feet the train was out of reach. He stared after it in despair.

The railwayman got up, brushing snow off his clothes, and said, 'What the 'ell was all that about?'

Hugh bent over, breathing like a leaky bellows, too weak to speak.

'A man has been shot,' he said when he caught his breath. As soon as he felt strong enough to move he led the railwayman to the bridge where Tonio lay.

Hugh knelt by the body. Tonio had been hit between the eyes, and there was not much left of his face. 'Good Lord, what a mess,' said the railwayman. Hugh swallowed hard, fighting down nausea. He remembered the mischievous boy with whom he had splashed around in the swimming-hole at Bishop's Wood twenty-four years earlier, and he felt a wave of grief that pushed him close to tears.

Hugh's head was clearing, and he could see, with anguished clarity,

how Micky had planned this. Micky had friends in the Foreign Office, as did every halfway-competent diplomat. One of them must have told him that Tonio was in London. Tonio had lodged his letters of accreditation already, so Micky knew his days were numbered. But if Tonio were to die the situation would become muddled again. There would be no one in London to negotiate on behalf of President Garcia, and Micky would be the *de facto* minister.

But how had he known where to find Tonio? Perhaps he had people following Tonio—or maybe Augusta had told him that Tonio had been there, asking where to find Hugh. Either way, he had followed Tonio to Chingford. To seek out Hugh's house would have meant talking to too many people. However, he knew that Tonio had to come back to the railway station sooner or later. So he had lurked near the station, waiting to kill him. It was a fearfully risky scheme, but Chingford had neither telegraph nor telephone, and there was no means of transport faster than the train. If things had gone according to plan he would have been back in London before the crime could be reported.

But he had failed to kill Hugh. And—Hugh suddenly realised—technically Micky was no longer the Cordovan Minister, so he had lost his diplomatic immunity. He could hang for this. Hugh stood up. 'We must report the murder,' he said.

'There's a police station in Walthamstow, a few stops down the line.'

'When's the next train?'

The railwayman took a large watch from his waistcoat pocket. 'Forty-seven minutes,' he said.

'We should both get on it. You go to the police in Walthamstow and I'll go on to town and report it to Scotland Yard.'

They carried Tonio to a bench in the waiting room. The railwayman sat on the opposite bench and Hugh sat beside him. They stayed like that, silent and watchful, sharing the cold room with the dead man, until the train came in.

MICKY MIRANDA'S LUCK was running out. He had committed four murders in the last twenty-four years, and he had got away with the first three, but this time he had stumbled. Hugh Pilaster had seen him shoot Tonio Silva in broad daylight, and there was no way to escape the hangman but by leaving England. Suddenly he was on the run. He hurried through Liverpool Street Station, avoiding the eyes of policemen, and dived into a hansom cab.

He went straight to the office of the Gold Coast and Mexico



Steamship Company. The place was crowded, mainly with Latins. Some would be trying to return to Cordova, others trying to get relatives out. Micky fought his way to the counter, using his cane indiscriminately on men and women to get through. His expensive clothes and upper-class arrogance got the attention of a clerk, and he said, 'I want to book passage to Cordova.'

'There's a war on in Cordova,' said the clerk.

Micky suppressed a sarcastic retort. 'You haven't suspended all sailings, I take it.'

'We're selling tickets to Lima, Peru. The ship will go on to Palma if political conditions permit.'

That would do. Micky mainly needed to get out of England. 'When is the next departure?'

'Four weeks from today.'

His heart sank. 'That's no good, I have to go sooner!'

'The *Aztec* is leaving Southampton tonight, if you're in a hurry.'

Thank heavens! His luck had not quite run out. 'Reserve me a stateroom—the best available.'

'Very good, sir. May I have the name?'

'Andrews,' he said. 'M.R. Andrews.' The police might check passenger lists, looking for the name Miranda. Now they would not find it. He was grateful for the insane liberalism of Britain's laws, which permitted people to enter and leave the country without passports. It would not have been so easy in Cordova.

The clerk gave him his ticket and he paid with banknotes. He pushed impatiently through the crowd and went out into the snow, still worrying. He hailed a hansom and directed it to the Cordovan Ministry, but then he had second thoughts. The police would be looking for a well-dressed man of forty, travelling alone. He needed an accomplice. Someone who could smuggle him aboard the *Aztec*. He could not trust any of his employees, especially now that he was no longer minister. That left Edward.

'Drive to Hill Street,' he told the cabbie.

Edward had moved to a small house in Mayfair. Unlike the other Pilasters, he did not care that Micky had brought ruin to his family. He had only become more dependent on him.

Edward answered the door in a stained silk dressing gown. The skin rash was all over his face now, and Micky had second thoughts about using him as an accomplice: the rash made him conspicuous. But there was no time to be choosy. 'I'm leaving the country,' he said.

Edward said, 'Oh, take me with you,' and burst into tears.

'What the devil is the matter with you?' Micky said.

'I'm dying,' Edward said.

'You're not dying, you damn fool—you've only got a skin disease.'

'It's not a skin disease, it's syphilis.'

Micky gasped in horror and fought down panic. He might have it too! But if he delayed in London to see a doctor he might die at the end of a rope. He had to leave the country today. The ship went via Lisbon: he could see a doctor there in a few days' time. That would have to do. But Edward was in no state to help smuggle him out of the country. He still needed an accomplice. There was only one candidate left: Augusta. He was not as sure of her as he was of Edward. But she was his last chance. He turned to go.

'Don't leave me,' Edward pleaded.

There was no time for sentiment. 'I can't take a dying man with me,' he snapped, and he went out without looking back.

AUGUSTA APPEARED her usual imperious self as she came into the drawing room in a purple silk blouse with leg-of-mutton sleeves and a black flared skirt with a tiny pinched waist. She did not offer him her hand. 'Why have you come here?' she said coldly. 'You've brought ruin to me and my family.'

'I didn't intend to—'

'You must have known that your father was about to launch a civil war.'

'But I didn't know that Cordovan bonds would become valueless because of the war,' he said. 'Did you?'

She hesitated. Obviously she had not. A crack had opened in her armour and he tried to widen it. 'I wouldn't have done it if I'd known—I would have cut my own throat before harming you.' He could tell she wanted to believe this. 'Anyway, it's irrelevant now. I'm leaving England, and I will probably never come back.'

She looked at him with sudden fear in her eyes, and he knew he had her. 'Why?' she said.

There was no time for beating about the bush. 'I have just shot and killed a man and the police are chasing me.'

She gasped and took his hand. 'Who?'

'Antonio Silva.'

She was excited as well as shocked. 'Tonio! Why?'

'He was a threat to me. I've booked passage on a steamer leaving Southampton tonight. I want you to come with me.'

Her eyes widened. She took a step back.

He kept hold of her hand. 'Having to leave—and so quickly—has made me realise that I love you, Augusta.'



As he acted his part he watched her face, reading it the way a sailor reads the surface of the sea. She gave the hint of a gratified smile, then a faint blush of embarrassment, and then a calculating look that told him she was reckoning up what she had to gain and lose. He saw she was still undecided, and put his hand on her corseted waist. He drew her gently towards him, and when their faces were close he said, 'I can't live without you, dear Augusta.' He could feel her trembling beneath his touch. He spoke into her ear, making his voice almost a whisper. 'Augusta . . .' He paused.

'What?' she said.

He almost had her, but not quite. He had to play his last card.

'Now that I'm no longer minister, I can divorce Rachel.'

'What are you saying?'

He whispered into her ear, 'Will you marry me?'

'Yes,' she said.

He kissed her.

APRIL TILSLEY BURST into Maisie's office at the Female Hospital, dressed to the nines in scarlet silk and fox fur, carrying a newspaper and saying, 'Have you heard what's happened?'

Maisie stood up. 'April! What on earth is it?'

'Micky Miranda shot Tonio Silva!'

Maisie knew who Micky was, but it took her a moment to remember that Tonio had been one of that crowd of boys around Solly and Hugh when they were young. He had been a gambler in those days, she recalled, and April had been sweet on him until she discovered that he always lost what little money he had in wagers. 'Micky *shot* him?' she said in amazement. 'Is he dead?'

'Yes. It's in the afternoon paper. It also says —' April hesitated. 'Sit down, Maisie.'

'Why? Tell me!'

'It says that the police want to question him about three other murders—Peter Middleton, Seth Pilaster and . . . Solomon Greenbourne.'

Maisie sat down heavily. 'Solly!' she said, and she felt faint. 'Micky killed Solly?' She closed her eyes and tried to pull herself together. 'Show me that paper.'

April handed her the newspaper.

Maisie read the first paragraph. It said the murder of Antonio Silva had taken place in a village called Chingford. Her heart missed a beat. 'Chingford!' she gasped.

'I've never heard of it—'

'It's where Hugh lives!'

'Hugh Pilaster? Are you still carrying a torch for him?'

'He must have been involved, don't you see? It can't be a coincidence! Oh, dear God, I hope he's all right.'

'I expect the paper would say if he had been hurt.'

'It only happened a few hours ago. They may not know.' She stood up. 'I must find out,' she said.

A STEWARD LED AUGUSTA to a stateroom on the upper deck of the *Aztec*. She had spent all her cash on the best cabin available, thinking that with Micky's family fortune she need not worry about money. The room opened directly onto the deck. Inside there were flowers on the dresser and a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice on a table.

She heard the traditional shout of 'All ashore that's going ashore!' as the porters brought her luggage into the cabin. When they had gone she stepped onto the narrow deck, turning up her coat collar against the snow. She leaned over the rail and looked down. There was a sheer drop to the water, where a tugboat was already in position to ease the great liner into the sea. As she watched, the gangways were withdrawn and the ropes cast off. A foghorn sounded and, almost imperceptibly, the huge ship began to move.

Augusta returned to her cabin and locked the door. She undressed slowly and put on a silk nightgown and a matching robe. Then she opened her trunk and let Micky out. He staggered across the stateroom and fell on the bed. 'Lord save me, I thought I was going to die,' he moaned.

'My poor darling, where does it hurt?'

'My legs.' She rubbed his calves. The muscles were knotted with cramp. She massaged his flesh with her fingertips, feeling the warmth of his skin through the cloth of his trousers. It was a long time since she had touched a man this way, and she felt a flush of heat rise at her throat. She took his hand, drew it to her lips, and kissed it; then she pressed it to her breast.

He looked at her curiously for a moment. Then he pulled away from her and sat up.

'You idiot,' he sneered, getting off the bed. 'You really thought I would marry you! What would I want with you?'

She felt a pain in her chest, like a knife in her heart. 'You said you loved me . . .'

'You're fifty-eight—my mother's age, for goodness' sake!'

She felt faint. Tears welled up in her eyes and she began to shake. She turned away from him: she did not want him to see her shame

and grief. 'But when we get to Cordova . . .' she whispered.

'You're not going to Cordova. You can get off the ship at Lisbon and go back to England. I've no further use for you. I've got a cabin reserved on this ship and that's where I'm going.'

Every word was like a blow and she backed away from him, holding her hands up in front of her as if to ward off his curses. She bumped against the cabin door. Desperate to get away from him, she opened it and backed out. The freezing night air cleared her head suddenly. She had lost control of her life briefly, and it was time to seize it back again.

A man in evening dress walked past her, smoking a cigar. He stared at her nightclothes in astonishment but did not speak to her.

That gave her an idea.

She stepped back into the cabin and closed the door. Micky was straightening his tie in the mirror. 'There's someone coming,' she said urgently. 'A policeman!'

Micky's demeanour changed in a flash. The sneer was wiped off his face and replaced by a look of panic. 'Oh, no,' he said.

Augusta was thinking quickly. 'We're still within British waters,' she said. 'You can be arrested and sent back on a coastguard cutter.' She had no idea whether this was true.

'I'll have to hide.' He climbed into the trunk.

She shut him in, then flipped the latch to lock it. 'That's better,' she said.

She sat on the bed, staring at the trunk. In her mind she went over their conversation. She had made herself vulnerable and he had wounded her. As the minutes went by her rage cooled and became a dark, vicious yearning for revenge.

Micky's voice, muffled, came from inside the trunk. 'Augusta! What's happening?'

She made no reply.

He began to shout for help. She covered the trunk with blankets from the bed to deaden the sound. After a while he stopped.

Thoughtfully, Augusta removed the labels bearing her name from the trunk. She heard cabin doors slam: passengers were heading for the dining room. The ship began to pitch slightly in the swell as it steamed out into the English Channel. The evening passed quickly for Augusta as she sat on the bed brooding. Passengers trickled back in twos and threes between midnight and two o'clock. After that the ship was quiet but for the sounds of the engines and the sea.

Augusta stared obsessively at the trunk. It had been carried up here on the back of a muscular porter. She could not lift it, but she thought

she could drag it. It had brass handles on the sides and leather straps top and bottom. She took hold of the strap on top and pulled, tilting the trunk sideways. It tipped over and fell on its face. Micky began to shout again, and she covered the trunk with blankets once more. Micky stopped yelling.

She seized the strap again and pulled. It was very heavy, but she was able to move it a few inches at a time. After each tug she rested. It took her ten minutes to drag the trunk to the cabin door. Then she put on her stockings, boots and fur coat, and opened the door.

There was no one around. The ship was lit by dim electric bulbs, and there were no stars. She dragged the trunk through the cabin door and rested again.

After that it was a little easier, for the deck was slippery with snow. Ten minutes later she had the trunk up against the rail. Taking hold of the strap, she lifted one end of the trunk and tried to bring it upright. On her first try she dropped it. The sound it made when it hit the deck seemed very loud, but no one came to investigate.

The second time she made a more determined effort. She got down on one knee, seized the strap with both hands, and slowly heaved up. When she had the trunk tilted at a forty-five-degree angle Micky moved inside, his weight shifting to the bottom end, and suddenly it became easy to push the whole thing upright. She tilted it again so that it was leaning on the rail.

The last part was the hardest of all. She bent down and took hold of the lower strap. She took a deep breath and lifted. She was not taking the whole weight of the trunk, for the other end was resting on the rail; but still it took all her strength to lift the thing an inch off the deck, and then her cold fingers slipped and she let it fall back.

She was not going to be able to manage it. But she could not give up. She had struggled so hard to bring the trunk this far. She bent down and seized the strap again.

Micky spoke again. 'Augusta, what are you doing?'

'Remember how Peter Middleton died,' she said.

She paused. There was no sound from inside the trunk.

'You're going to die the same way,' she said.

'No, please, Augusta, my love,' he said.

'The water will be colder, and it will taste salty as it fills your lungs; but you'll know the terror he knew as death closes over your heart.'

He began to shout. 'Help! Help! Someone, save me!'

Augusta grabbed the strap and lifted with all her strength. The bottom of the trunk came up off the deck. As Micky realised what was happening his muffled shouts became louder and more terrified.

Soon someone would come. Augusta gave another heave. She lifted the foot of the trunk to chest level and stopped, exhausted, feeling she could do no more. Frantic scrabbling sounds came from inside as Micky tried hopelessly to get out. She closed her eyes, clenched her jaw, and pushed. As she strained with all her might, she felt something give way in her back, and she cried out with pain, but she kept lifting. The bottom of the trunk was now higher than the top, and it slid forward on the rail several inches; but it stopped. Augusta's back was in agony. She knew she could only lift one more time. She gathered her strength, closed her eyes, and heaved.

The trunk slid slowly forward on the rail, then fell into space.

Micky screamed a long scream that died into the wind.

HUGH WAS DESPERATELY WEARY when at last his train pulled into Chingford Station. Although he was looking forward to his bed, he stopped on the bridge, at the spot where Micky had shot Tonio that morning. So far, Micky had evaded the police. He took off his hat and stood there for a minute, bareheaded in the snow, remembering his friend, Tonio. Then he walked on.

He hoped Nora would be asleep when he got home. He did not want to hear what a miserable day she had had, stuck in this remote village with no one to help her take care of three rowdy boys. But there was a light on behind the curtains as he walked up the garden path. That meant she was still up. He let himself in with his key and went into the front room.

He was surprised to see the three boys, all in their pyjamas, sitting in a row on the sofa looking at an illustrated book. And he was astonished to see Maisie in the middle, reading to them.

All three boys jumped up and ran to him. He hugged and kissed them one by one: Sol, the youngest; then Samuel; then eleven-year-old Toby. The younger two were simply overjoyed to see him, but there was something else in Toby's face. 'What is it, old man?' Hugh asked him. 'Where's your mama?'

'She went shopping,' he said, and burst into tears.

Hugh put his arm round the boy and looked at Maisie.

'I got here around four o'clock,' she said. 'Nora must have gone out shortly after you.'

'She left them alone?'

Maisie nodded.

Hugh felt hot anger rise up inside him. Anything could have happened. 'How could she do that?' he said bitterly.

'There's a note.' Maisie handed him an envelope.



He opened it and read the one-word message: *GOODBYE*.

Maisie said, 'It wasn't sealed. Toby read it and showed it to me.'

'It's hard to believe,' Hugh said, but it wasn't. Nora had always put her own wishes above everything else. Now she had abandoned her children. The note implied that she was not coming back.

He did not know what to feel. His first duty was to the boys. It was important not to upset them further. 'You boys are up very late,' he said. 'Time for bed. Let's go!'

He ushered them up the stairs. Samuel and Sol shared a room but Toby had his own bedroom. Hugh tucked the little ones in, then went in to the eldest. He bent over the bed to kiss him.

'Mrs Greenbourne's a brick,' Toby said.

'I know,' Hugh said.

'She's pretty, too.'

'Do you think so?'

'Yes. Is Mama coming back?'

That was the question Hugh had been afraid of. He sighed. 'To tell you the truth, old man, I don't know.'

'If she doesn't, will Mrs Greenbourne look after us?'

Trust a child to go right to the heart of the matter, Hugh thought. He evaded the question. 'She runs a hospital,' he said. 'She's got dozens of patients to take care of. I don't suppose she has time to look after boys as well. Now, no more questions. Good night.'

'Good night, Father.'

Hugh blew out the candle and left the room, closing the door.

Maisie had made cocoa. 'I'm sure you'd prefer a brandy, but there doesn't seem to be any in the house.'

Hugh smiled. 'We in the lower middle classes can't afford to drink spirits. Cocoa is fine.'

Cups and a jug stood on a tray, but neither of them moved to it. They stood in the middle of the room looking at each other. Maisie said, 'I read about the shooting in the afternoon paper, and came here to see if you were all right. I found the children on their own, and gave them supper.' She smiled a resigned, accepting smile that said it was up to Hugh what happened next.

He began to tremble. He leaned on the back of a chair for support. 'It's been quite a day,' he said shakily. 'I'm feeling a little odd.'

'Perhaps you ought to sit down.'

Suddenly he was overwhelmed by love for her. Instead of sitting, he threw his arms round her. 'Hug me hard,' he pleaded.

She squeezed his waist.

'I love you, Maisie,' he said. 'I've always loved you.'

'I know,' she said.

He looked into her eyes. They were full of tears and, as he watched, one tear overflowed and trickled down her face. He kissed it away.

'After all these years,' he said. 'After all these years.'

'Make love to me tonight, Hugh,' she said.

He nodded. 'And every night, from now on.' He kissed her again.

## Epilogue – 1892

From *The Times*:

### DEATHS

On the 30th May, at his residence in Antibes, France, after a long illness, the Earl of Whitehaven, formerly senior partner of Pilasters Bank.

'EDWARD'S DEAD,' Hugh said, looking up from the newspaper.

Maisie sat beside him in the railway carriage, wearing a summer dress in deep yellow with red spots and a little hat with yellow taffeta ribbons. They were on their way to Windfield School for Speech Day.

'He was a rotten swine, but his mother will miss him,' she said.

Augusta and Edward had been living together in the South of France for the past eighteen months. Despite what they had done, the syndicate paid them the same allowance as all the other Pilasters. They were both invalids: Edward had terminal syphilis and Augusta had suffered a slipped disc and spent most of her time in a wheelchair. Nevertheless, she had become the uncrowned queen of the English community in that part of the world: matchmaker, arbitrator of disputes and promulgator of social rules.

The train chugged into Windfield Station and Maisie and Hugh got out. It was the end of Toby's first year and Bertie's last year at the school. The day was warm and the sun was bright. Maisie opened her parasol—it was made of the same spotted silk as her dress—and they walked to the school.

It had changed a lot in the twenty-six years since Hugh had left. His old headmaster, Dr Poleson, was long dead, and the new head wielded the notorious cane they had called the Striper less frequently. The fourth-form dormitory was still in the old dairy by the chapel, but there was a new building with a hall that could seat all the boys.

They were surprised to meet Ben Greenbourne outside the hall.

Maisie, blunt as ever, said, 'Hello, what are you doing here?'

'My grandson is head boy,' he replied. 'I've come to hear his speech.'

Hugh was startled. Bertie was not Greenbourne's grandson, and the old man knew it. Was he softening in his old age?

'Sit down by me,' Greenbourne commanded. Hugh looked at Maisie. She shrugged and sat down, and Hugh followed suit.

'I hear you two are married,' Greenbourne said.

'Last month,' Hugh said. 'My first wife didn't contest the divorce.' Nora was living with a whisky salesman and it had taken Hugh's hired detective less than a week to get proof of adultery.

'I don't approve of divorce,' Greenbourne said crisply. Then he sighed. 'But I'm too old to tell people what to do. I wish you the best.'

Hugh took Maisie's hand and squeezed it.

Greenbourne addressed Maisie. 'Will you send the boy to university?'

'I can't afford it,' Maisie said.

'I'd be glad to pay,' Greenbourne said.

Maisie was surprised. 'It's kind of you,' she said.

'I should have been kinder years ago,' he replied. 'I put you down as a fortune hunter. It was one of my mistakes. If you were only after money you wouldn't have married young Pilaster here.'

The schoolboys began to file into the hall, the youngest sitting on the floor at the front and the older boys on chairs.

Maisie said to Greenbourne, 'Hugh has adopted Bertie legally now.'

The old man turned his sharp eyes on Hugh. 'I suppose you're the real father,' he said bluntly.

Hugh nodded.

'I should have guessed a long time ago. It doesn't matter. The boy thinks I'm his grandfather, and that gives me a responsibility.' He changed the subject. 'I hear the syndicate is going to pay a dividend.'

'That's right,' Hugh said. The syndicate that had rescued the bank had made a small profit. 'All the members will get about five per cent on their investment.'

'Well done. I didn't think you'd manage it.'

'The new government in Cordova did it. They handed over the assets of the Miranda family to the Santamaria Harbour Company, and that made the bonds worth something again.'

'What happened to that chap Miranda? He was a bad lot.'

'Micky? His body was found in a steamer trunk washed up on a beach on the Isle of Wight. No one ever found out how it got there.'

A schoolboy came round handing out inky handwritten copies of the school song to all the parents and relatives.

'And you?' Greenbourne said to Hugh. 'What will you do when the syndicate is wound up?'

'I was planning to ask your advice about that,' Hugh said. 'I'd like to start a new bank.'

'How?'

'Float shares on the market. Pilasters Limited. What do you think?'

'It's a bold idea, but then you always were original.' Greenbourne looked thoughtful for a moment. 'The funny thing is, the failure of your bank has enhanced your reputation, because of the way you handled things. After all, who could be more reliable than a banker who pays his creditors even after he's crashed?'

'So . . . do you think it would work?'

'I'm sure of it. I might even put money into it myself.'

Hugh nodded gratefully. He had thought his plan would work, but Greenbourne's approval put the seal on his confidence.

Everyone stood up as Bertie, the head boy, came to the lectern and said in a ringing voice, 'Let us sing the school song.'

Hugh caught Maisie's eye and she smiled proudly. The familiar notes of the introduction sounded, and they all began to sing.

AN HOUR LATER Hugh left them having tea in Bertie's study and slipped out through the squash court into Bishop's Wood. It was hot, just like that day twenty-six years ago. He remembered the way to the swimming-hole and found it without difficulty. He sat on the rim of the quarry and threw a stone into the pool. It broke the glassy stillness of the water and sent out ripples in perfect circles.

He was the only one left, except for Albert Cammel out in the Cape Colony. The others were all dead: Peter Middleton killed that day; Tonio shot by Micky two Christmases ago; Micky himself drowned in a steamer trunk; and now Edward, dead of syphilis and buried in a cemetery in France. It was as if something evil had come up out of the deep water that day in 1866, bringing all the dark passions that had blighted their lives: hatred and greed and selfishness and cruelty, fomenting deceit, bankruptcy, disease and murder. But it was over now. The debts were paid. If there had been an evil spirit, it had returned to the bottom of the pond. And Hugh had survived.

He stood up. It was time to return to his family. He walked away, then took a last look back.

The ripples from the stone had disappeared, and the surface of the water was immaculately still once again.

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## KEN FOLLETT

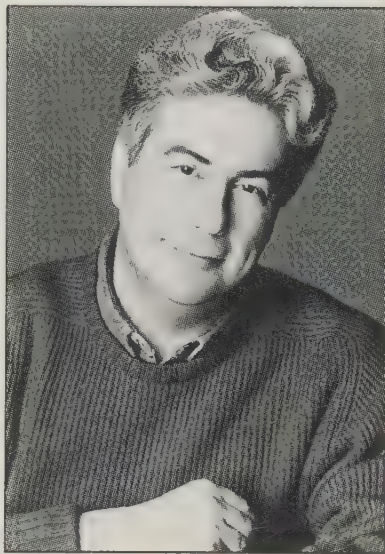
Ever since Ken Follett hit the best-seller lists fifteen years ago with *Eye of the Needle*, he has been hailed by critics and fans alike for his storytelling genius. Where does he get his ideas from? In the case of *A Dangerous Fortune*, Follett was inspired by a newspaper article he read about the collapse of a big investment bank in 1890. 'What particularly caught my imagination,' he explains, 'was the situation of three very wealthy and highly respected Victorian patriarchs having to sell everything then live in relative poverty to pay off their debts.'

The Victorian Age has long intrigued Follett, who counts the eminent authors of the period, such as Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, among his favourites. To re-create the era in his own novel, Follett did extensive research, gathering information on everything from bond issues to society balls. A former reporter, he prides himself on getting even the smallest details just right. When a copy editor queried the lingerie worn by one female character in the book, Follett was able to produce an advertisement demonstrating that the garment in question did indeed exist at the time.

The son of a Welsh tax inspector and grandson of a cobbler, Follett graduated from London University with an Honours degree in Philosophy. In need of money to repair his car, he wrote his first book in six weeks and sold it to a publisher of mystery novels.

Today, the Welsh-born Follett lives in London's Chelsea with his wife, Barbara, in a two-hundred-year-old house overlooking the Thames. For relaxation he plays bass guitar and sometimes performs in a blues band. Known to friends as a ferocious worker, he can never be idle for long. He's already researching his next book: a novel about British convicts who were transported to colonial America.

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# the CLIENT

*John Grisham*

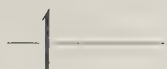
ILLUSTRATED BY ALEX ZWARENSTEIN



**Mark Sway is eleven years old. He's a normal kid, just like any other kid in the neighbourhood. He likes to ride his bike with his little brother, Ricky, and play games in the woods behind his house. He even likes school—a little.**

**So what could an everyday kid like Mark Sway know about murder?**

**Plenty.**



Mark was eleven and had been smoking off and on for two years, never trying to quit but being careful not to get hooked. He preferred Kools, his ex-father's brand, but his mother smoked Virginia Slims at the rate of two packs a day, and in an average week he could pilfer ten or twelve from her. She was a busy woman with many problems, perhaps a little naive when it came to her boys, and she never dreamed her elder son would be smoking at the age of eleven.

He had four of his mother's cigarettes in his pocket this afternoon as he led his brother Ricky, aged eight, down the path into the woods behind their trailer park. Ricky had caught Mark hiding the cigarettes in a shoe box under his bed the previous day and threatened to tell all if his big brother didn't show him how to smoke. They sneaked along the wooded trail, heading for one of Mark's secret spots where he'd spent many solitary hours trying to blow smoke rings.

Most of the other kids in the neighbourhood were into beer and pot, two vices Mark was determined to avoid. Their ex-father was an alcoholic who'd beaten both boys and their mother, and the beatings always followed his nasty bouts with beer. The only time their father had spent at home was to drink and sleep and abuse them.

'Are you lost?' Ricky asked, just like a little brother, as they left the trail and waded through chest-high weeds.

'Just shut up,' Mark said without slowing. Their father was gone now, thank heavens. For five years Mark had been in charge of Ricky. He felt like an eleven-year-old father. He'd taught him how to

throw a football and ride a bike. He'd warned him about drugs and protected him from bullies. And he felt terrible about this introduction to vice. But it was just a cigarette. It could be much worse.

The weeds stopped, and they were under a large tree with a rope hanging from a thick branch. A row of bushes gave way to a small clearing, and beyond it a dirt road disappeared over a hill.

Mark stopped and pointed to a log near the rope. 'Sit there,' he instructed, and Ricky obediently backed onto the log. Mark picked a cigarette from his shirt pocket and held it with his right thumb and index finger, trying to be casual about it.

'You know the rules,' he said, looking down at Ricky.

There were only two rules, and they had discussed them a dozen times. Ricky said, 'Yeah, if I tell anyone, you'll beat me up.'

'That's right.'

'And I can smoke only one a day.'

'That's right. If I catch you smoking more than that, then you're in trouble.'

'How many do you smoke a day?'

'Only one,' Mark lied. Some days only one. Some days three or four, depending on supply.

'Will one a day kill me?' Ricky asked.

'Not any time soon. One a day is pretty safe.' He pinched the filter with his thumb and index finger and waved it before Ricky's mouth. 'Are you scared?' he sneered, as only big brothers can.

'No.'

'I think you are. Look, hold it like this, OK?' He waved it closer then, with great drama, withdrew it and stuck it between his lips. Ricky watched intently.

Mark lit the cigarette, puffed a tiny cloud of smoke and admired it. 'Don't try to swallow the smoke. Just suck a little, then blow the smoke out.' He took two quick drags and puffed for effect. 'See? It's really easy. I'll teach you how to inhale later.'

'OK.' Ricky nervously reached out with his thumb and index finger, and Mark placed the cigarette carefully between them.

Ricky eased the wet filter to his lips, took a short drag and blew smoke. Another drag. Mark watched carefully, hoping he would choke and cough and turn blue, then get sick and never smoke again.

'It's easy,' Ricky said proudly as he held the cigarette and admired it. His hand was shaking.

'Yeah, it's no big deal.' Mark sat next to him on the log and picked another one from his pocket. Ricky was busy puffing, enjoying this giant step towards manhood. Mark lit his cigarette and attempted a



smoke ring, but the ring failed to form and the grey smoke dissipated.

'How old were you when you started to smoke?' Ricky asked.

'Nine. But I was more mature than you.'

'You always say that.'

'That's because it's always true.'

Mark had been more mature than Ricky at the age of eight. He'd always been mature. When he was nine, Mark convinced his mother to file for divorce. He had called the cops when his father showed up drunk after being served with divorce papers. He had testified in court about the abuse and neglect and beatings. He was very mature.

Ricky heard the car first. It was coming along the dirt road. Then Mark heard it. 'Just sit still,' Mark said softly. They did not move.

A long, black, shiny Lincoln appeared over the slight hill and eased towards them. The weeds in the road were as high as the front bumper. Mark dropped his cigarette to the ground and covered it with his shoe. Ricky did the same.

The car slowed almost to a stop as it neared the clearing, then circled round, touching the trees as it moved slowly. It stopped and faced the road. The boys were directly behind it and hidden from view. Mark slid off the log and crawled through the weeds to the edge of the clearing. Ricky followed. The rear of the Lincoln was thirty feet away. It had Louisiana licence plates.

'What's he doing?' Ricky whispered.

'Shhhhhh!'

The engine quit, and the car just sat there in the weeds for a minute. Then the door opened. The driver stepped out and looked around. He was a chubby, bearded man in a black suit. He stumbled to the rear of the car, fumbled with the keys and opened the boot. He removed a water hose, stuck one end into the exhaust pipe, and ran the other end through a crack in the left rear window. He closed the boot, looked around again, then disappeared into the car. The engine started.

'Wow,' Mark said softly, staring blankly at the car.

'What's he doing?' Ricky asked.

'He's trying to kill himself.'

Ricky raised his head for a better view. 'I don't understand.'

'You see the hose? The fumes from the tail pipe go into the car, and it kills him. I saw a guy do it in a movie once.'

'I'm leaving, Mark.' Ricky's breathing was heavy.

'But we gotta do something.' Mark eased onto all fours. 'You stay here, OK?'

'What're you doing, Mark?'

'Just stay here.' Mark lowered his thin body almost to the ground

and crawled on elbows and knees through the weeds until he was in the shadow of the boot. He carefully eased the hose from the exhaust and dropped it to the ground. Seconds later he was crouched next to Ricky in the dense undergrowth beneath the tree.

They waited. Five minutes passed. It seemed like an hour.

'You think he's dead?' Ricky whispered.

'I don't know.'

Suddenly the door opened, and the man stepped out. He staggered to the rear of the car, where he saw the hose in the grass, and cursed it as he shoved it back into the exhaust. He looked around wildly at the trees, then stumbled back into the car and slammed the door.

The boys watched in horror.

'Let's get out of here,' Ricky said.

'We can't! If he kills himself, and we saw it or knew about it, then we could get in all kinds of trouble.'

Ricky raised his head as if to retreat. 'Then we won't tell anybody. Come on, Mark!'

Mark grabbed his shoulder and forced him to the ground. 'Just stay down. We're not leaving until I say we're leaving.'

Ricky closed his eyes tightly and started crying. Mark shook his head in disgust. Little brothers were more trouble than they were worth. 'Stop it,' he growled through clenched teeth.

'I'm scared.'

'Fine. Just don't move, OK?' Mark was back on his elbows. He crawled along his same trail of lightly trampled grass so slowly that Ricky could barely see him. Ricky watched Mark emerge under the rear bumper, place a hand for balance on the rear light, and slowly ease the hose from the exhaust. The grass crackled softly and Mark was next to him again, panting and sweating.

'What if he comes out again?' Ricky asked. 'What if he sees us?'

'He can't see us. But if he starts this way, just follow me. We'll be gone before he can take a step.'

'Why don't we go now?'

Mark stared at him fiercely. 'I'm trying to save his life, OK? Maybe he'll see that this is not working, and maybe he'll decide he should wait, or something.'

Suddenly the door opened again. The man rolled out of the car, talking to himself, and stomped through the grass to the rear. He looked down and froze, as if he suddenly understood. The grass was slightly trampled around the rear of the car, and he knelt as if to inspect it, but then crammed the hose back into the exhaust and hurried back to his door.

‘Mark, please, let’s go,’ Ricky pleaded. ‘He almost saw us. What if he’s got a gun or something?’

‘If he had a gun, he’d use it on himself.’

Ricky bit his lip, and his eyes watered again. He had never won an argument with his brother, and he would not win this one.

Mark began to fidget. ‘I’ll try one more time, OK? And if he doesn’t give up, then we’ll get outta here. I promise, OK?’

Ricky nodded reluctantly. His brother stretched on his stomach and inched his way into the tall grass.

THE LAWYER’S NOSTRILS flared as he inhaled mightily, trying to determine if the deadly gas had begun its work. A loaded pistol was on the seat next to him. A half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s was in his hand. A note was on the dashboard, next to a bottle of pills.

He cried and talked to himself as he waited for the gas to hurry, damn it, before he’d give up and use the gun. He much preferred this sniffing and floating away to sticking a gun in his mouth.

Yes, it was finally working. Soon it would all be over. He smiled at himself in the mirror because he was not a coward, after all.

He muttered as he removed the cap of the whiskey bottle for one last swallow. As he turned the bottle up, he glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the weeds move behind the car.

RICKY SAW THE DOOR open before Mark heard it. It flew open, as if kicked, and suddenly the large, heavy man, his face red, was running through the weeds, growling.

Mark froze for a second when he heard the door, and the hesitation nailed him. His foot slipped as he tried to stand and run, and the man grabbed him. Mark kicked and squirmed, and a fat hand slapped him in the face. When he had him pinned and stilled and subdued, the lawyer stuck the hose back into the exhaust pipe, then dragged him to the open driver’s door, and shoved him through the door and across the black leather seat. Mark was grabbing at the door handle and searching for the door-lock switch when the man fell behind the steering wheel. He slammed the door behind him, pointed at the door handle and screamed, ‘Don’t touch that!’ Then he backhanded Mark in the left eye with a vicious slap.

Mark shrieked in pain, grabbed his eyes and bent over, stunned, crying now. His nose and his mouth hurt. He was dizzy. He tasted blood. His left eye was beginning to swell. Things were blurred.

The fat lawyer stared at Mark. ‘Stop crying,’ he snarled.

Mark rubbed the bump above his eye and tried to stop.

The engine was running softly. He turned slowly and glanced at the hose winding through the rear window behind the driver. 'Please let me out of here,' Mark said, his voice cracking.

The driver stuck the whiskey bottle in his mouth and turned it up. He grimaced and smacked his lips. 'Sorry, kid. You had to stick your dirty little nose into my business, didn't you? So I think we should die together. OK? Just you and me, pal. Sweet dreams, kid.'

Mark sniffed the air, then noticed the pistol lying between them.

'You want the gun?' the man asked.

'No, sir.'

'So why are you looking at it?'

'I wasn't.'

'Don't lie to me, kid, because if you do, I'll kill you. I'm crazy as hell, OK? And I'll kill you.'

He screwed the cap onto the whiskey bottle, then grabbed the pistol and pointed it at Mark. 'I've never shot this thing, you know,' he said almost in a whisper. 'Just bought it an hour ago at a pawnshop here in Memphis. Do you think it'll work?'

Mark did not look at the pistol. He sniffed the air and thought he smelled something. 'Why are you doing this?' he asked.

'I'm nuts, OK, kid? Over the edge. I planned a nice little private suicide—you know, just me and my hose and maybe a few pills and some whiskey. But no, you have to get cute.' He lowered the pistol and placed it on the seat. 'Just you and me, pal.' Mark rubbed the bump on his forehead again. His hands were shaking.

RICKY'S TEETH CHATTERED, but he moved from his crouch onto his hands and knees and into the grass. He crawled towards the car, crying and gritting his teeth as he slid on his stomach. The door was about to fly open. The crazy man would leap from nowhere and grab him by the neck, just as he'd grabbed Mark, and they'd all die in the long black car. Inch by inch he pushed his way through the weeds.

MARK SLOWLY LIFTED the pistol with both hands. It shook as he pointed it at the fat man, who leaned towards it.

'Now, pull the trigger, kid,' he said with a smile, his face glowing with anticipation. 'Pull the trigger, and I'll be dead and you go free.'

Mark closed his eyes. He held his breath and was about to squeeze the trigger when the man jerked the gun from him. He waved it wildly in front of Mark's face and pulled the trigger. Mark screamed as the window behind his head cracked into a thousand pieces, but did not shatter. 'It works!' he yelled as Mark ducked and covered his ears.

RICKY BURIED HIS FACE in the grass when he heard the shot, and for a minute afterwards he did not move. He cried for his brother, who was dead now—shot by a crazy man.

‘STOP CRYING, DAMN IT! I’m sick of your crying!’

Mark clutched his knees and tried to stop crying. He had to think of something. On a television show once, some nut was about to jump off a building and this cool cop just kept talking to him; and finally the nut started talking back and, of course, did not jump. Mark smelled for gas and asked again, ‘Why are you doing this?’

‘Because I want to die,’ the man said calmly. He took a long drink from the bottle. ‘I feel the gas, kid. Do you feel it? Finally.’

In the side mirror, through the cracks in the window, Mark caught a glimpse of Ricky as he slithered through the weeds and ducked into the bushes. Mark closed his eyes and said a prayer.

‘I gotta tell you, kid, it’s nice having you here. No one wants to die alone. What’s your name?’

‘Mark Sway.’ Keep talking, and maybe the nut won’t jump. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Jerome. But you can call me Romey.’ Completely at ease, he closed his eyes. ‘We’ve got about five minutes, Mark. Any last words?’

‘Yeah. Why are you doing this, Romey?’ Mark asked. He took short, quick breaths through the nose and neither smelled nor felt anything. Surely Ricky had removed the hose?

‘Because I’m crazy—just another crazy lawyer, Mark.’

Mark breathed deeply. ‘What made you crazy?’

Romey actually chuckled a little. ‘You see, Mark, lawyers hear all sorts of private stuff that we can never repeat. Strictly confidential, you understand. No way we can ever tell what happened to the money or where the body’s buried. You follow?’ He inhaled mightily and exhaled with pleasure. ‘It’s happening, pal. Do you feel it?’

Mark closed his eyes and felt nothing. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘My client killed a man and hid the body, and now he wants to kill me. They’ve made me crazy. Ha-ha! This is great, Mark. This is wonderful. I, the trusted lawyer, can now tell you, literally seconds before we float away, where the body is. The body, Mark—the most notorious undiscovered corpse of our time.’ His eyes were open now and glowing down at Mark. ‘This is funny, Mark!’

‘Who did your client kill?’ Mark asked, missing the humour.

Romey grinned. ‘A United States senator. Senator Boyette, from New Orleans. That’s where I’m from.’



‘Why did your client kill Senator Boyette?’

‘My client has killed a lot of people. That’s how he makes money. He’s a member of the Mafia in New Orleans, and now he’s trying to kill me. Too bad, ain’t it, kid? We beat him to it. Joke’s on him.’

Romey took a long drink from the bottle and stared at Mark.

‘Just think about it, kid. Right now Barry—or Barry “the Blade”, as he’s known—is waiting for me in a restaurant in New Orleans. After a quiet dinner he’ll want me to get in the car and take a little drive—talk about his case and all—and then he’ll pull out a knife, and I’m history. They’ll dispose of my body somewhere, just like they did Senator Boyette. But we showed them, didn’t we, kid?’

His speech was slower and his tongue thicker.

Keep him talking. ‘So where’s the body?’

Romey snorted and his head nodded. The voice was almost a whisper. ‘The body of Boyd Boyette—murdered by my dear client, Barry “the Blade” Muldanno, who shot him in the head four times, then hid the body. No body, no case. Do you understand, kid?’

‘Not really.’

‘You see, kid, the Feds have to have a body to prove there was a murder. They know Barry did it. But they need the body.’

‘Where is it?’

Romey moved the gun along his leg. ‘The body’s under my boat.’

‘Your boat?’

‘Yes, my boat. He was in a hurry. I was out of town, so my beloved client took the body to my house and buried it in fresh concrete under my garage. The FBI has dug up half of New Orleans trying to find it, but they’ve never thought about my house.’

‘When did he tell you this?’

‘I’m sick of your questions, kid.’

‘I’d really like to leave now.’

‘Shut up. The gas is working. We’re gone, kid, gone.’

Mark glanced at the red face and heavy eyelids. A quick snort, almost a snore, and the head nodded downwards. He was passing out. Mark breathed deeply. He knew there would be no more chances. Slowly he inched his shaking finger to the door handle.

RICKY WAS UNDER THE TREE, away from the bushes and the tall grass. Five minutes had passed since he had removed the hose. Five minutes since the gunshot. But he knew his brother was alive because he had caught a glimpse of his head moving about in the huge car.

As he crouched low and stared at the car and ached for his brother, the passenger door flew open and there was Mark. He raced low

through the grass and within seconds made it to the tree, where Ricky watched in mute horror.

'I pulled the hose out,' Ricky said in a shrill voice. Mark nodded, but said nothing. He was suddenly much calmer.

'I'm scared, Mark. Let's go,' Ricky said, his hands shaking.

'Just a minute.' Mark studied the car intently.

Suddenly, the driver's door swung open, and Romey stumbled out with the pistol. He mumbled loudly as he stumbled to the rear of the car and once again found the garden hose lying harmlessly in the grass. He screamed obscenities at the sky.

Mark crouched low and held Ricky with him. Romey spun round and surveyed the trees near the clearing. Sweat dripped from his hair, and his black jacket was soaked and glued to him. He stomped back to the rear of the car, sobbing and screaming.

He stopped, wrestled his ponderous bulk onto the top of the boot, then squirmed and slid backwards until he hit the rear window. He took the gun and stuck it deep in his mouth. He closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.



The shoes were shark, and the vanilla silk socks ran all the way to the kneecaps of Barry Muldanno, or Barry the Blade, or simply the Blade, as he liked to be called. The dark green double-breasted suit had a shine to it and hung handsomely on his well-built frame. And it rippled nicely as he strutted to the payphone in the rear of the restaurant. He could pass for a well-dressed drug importer or perhaps a hot Vegas bookie, and that was fine because he was the Blade and he expected people to notice, and gawk in fear and get out of his way.

The hair was black and full, slicked down and pulled back into a perfect little ponytail that touched precisely at the top of the dark green jacket. The obligatory diamond earring sparkled from the left lobe. A tasteful gold bracelet clung to the left wrist just below the diamond Rolex and rattled softly as he strutted.

The swagger stopped in front of the payphone, which was near the rest rooms in a narrow hallway. He punched the number of his lawyer's office and said rapidly, without waiting for a reply, 'Yeah, this is Barry. Where's Jerome? He's late. Supposed to meet me here forty minutes ago. Have you seen him?'

The Blade's voice had the menacing resonance of a New Orleans street thug. It was arrogant and intimidating. The secretary on the

other end swallowed hard and informed him that Mr Clifford had left the office around 9am and had not been heard from since.

The Blade slammed the phone down and stormed through the hallway. He just wanted a few drinks and then a nice dinner with his lawyer so they could talk about his mess. Jerome was paranoid and had told Barry he thought the Feds were watching and listening, and had wired his law office. So they would meet here and not worry about eavesdroppers and bugging devices.

They needed to talk. Clifford had been defending prominent New Orleans thugs—gangsters, pushers, politicians—for fifteen years, and his record was impressive. He was cunning and corrupt. He drank with the judges, bribed the cops and threatened the jurors. When a sleazy defendant with money needed help in New Orleans, he invariably found his way to W. Jerome Clifford.

Barry's case, however, was different. The trial was a month away and loomed like an execution. It would be his second murder trial. His first had come at the age of eighteen when a local prosecutor attempted to prove that Barry had slit the throat of a rival thug. Barry's uncle, Johnny Sulari, a seasoned mobster, had dropped some money here and there, and the jury could not agree on a verdict and thus simply hung itself.

Barry later served two years in a federal joint on racketeering charges. His uncle could have saved him again, but he was ready for a brief imprisonment. It would look good on his résumé. The family was proud of him. Jerome Clifford had handled the plea bargain, and they'd been friends ever since.

Barry swaggered up to the bar, watching himself in the mirror. He caught a few stares—after all, at this moment he was the most famous murder defendant in the country. His face was all over the papers: UNITED STATES OF AMERICA VERSUS BARRY MULDANNO. Of course, there was no body, and this presented tremendous problems for the United States of America. No corpse meant no pathology reports, no ballistics, no bloody photographs to wave around the courtroom and display for the jury.

But Jerome was cracking up—staying away from the office, not returning calls, always mumbling under his breath and drinking too much. Barry wanted a new lawyer. And Barry needed time—a delay, a continuance, something. Why does justice move so quickly when you don't want it to? He'd seen other cases drag on for years. But he'd been indicted only six months ago, and bam! Here's the trial. It wasn't fair. Romey wasn't working. He had to be replaced.

Of course, the Feds had a hole or two in their case. No one actually

saw him do the killing. But there would be decent circumstantial evidence against him—with motive, perhaps. And there was an unreliable informant, if he made it to trial. The Feds were hiding him. But Barry had his one marvellous advantage—the body of Boyd Boyette, hidden away in concrete. Without it the US attorney in New Orleans, Roy Foltrigg, could not get a conviction.

Foltrigg's case was weak all right, but it hadn't slowed his nightly sermons in front of the cameras or his pompous predictions of swift justice. He was an oily-voiced, pious official with a thunderous opinion about everything. He had his very own press agent, charged with the task of keeping Roy in the spotlight so that one day soon the public would insist he serve them in the United States Senate.

The Blade remembered Roy Foltrigg waving his indictment before the cameras and bellowing all sorts of forecasts of good triumphing over evil. But six months had passed since the indictment, and neither Roy nor his confederates, the FBI, had found the body of Boyd Boyette. They had drained ponds and dragged rivers. They had obtained dozens of search warrants. They had spent a small fortune on bulldozers. But Barry had it. The body of Boyd Boyette.

Clifford was an hour late now, and Barry left the restaurant cursing lawyers in general and his in particular. He needed a new lawyer, one who would return his phone calls and find some jurors who could be bought. A real lawyer!

He walked casually along Magazine between Canal and Poydras. The air was thick. Clifford's office was four blocks away.

Clifford wanted a quick trial because there was no corpse, thus no case. What an idiot! No one wanted a quick trial in this system. They had argued viciously in Clifford's office, and at one point Barry had boasted that the body would never be found.

'So where's the body?' Clifford had asked.

'You don't want to know,' Barry had replied.

'Sure I want to know. The whole world wants to know. Come on, tell me, if you've got the guts.'

Barry chuckled to himself as he strolled along Poydras. He shouldn't have told Clifford. It was a childish thing to do, but harmless. The man could be trusted with secrets—attorney-client privilege, and all.

'You remember what day Boyette disappeared?' Barry had asked.

'Sure. January sixteenth.'

'Remember where you were, January sixteenth?'

At this point, Romey had studied the badly scrawled monthly planner on his desk. 'Colorado, skiing.'

'And I borrowed your house?'

'Yeah. You were meeting some doctor's wife.'

'That's right. Except she couldn't make it, so I took the senator to your house.'

Romey had glared at his client in disbelief. 'Where?'

'In the garage. Under the boat that hasn't been moved in ten years.'

'You're lying.'

Barry reached the front door of Clifford's office. It was locked. Barry rattled it and cursed through the window. He lit a cigarette and searched the usual parking places for the black Lincoln. He'd find Clifford if it took all night.

Barry had a friend in Miami who was once indicted on an assortment of drug charges. His lawyer had managed to stall and delay for two and a half years until finally the judge ordered a trial. Barry's friend killed his lawyer, and the judge was forced to grant another continuance. The trial never happened.

If Romey died suddenly, it would be months before the trial.



Ricky backed away from the tree until he was in the weeds, then found the narrow trail and started to run. 'Ricky,' Mark called. 'Hey, Ricky, wait.' But it didn't work, and Mark jogged towards the trail. His brother was ahead, running in an odd way, leaning forward at the waist, with both arms stiff and straight down by his legs. He was breathing hard and moaning. Mark followed close behind.

The trees thinned just before the crumbling board fence that encircled most of the trailer park. Ricky crawled through a broken section of the fence. He jumped a ditch, darted between two trailers and ran into the street. Mark was two steps behind. The steady groan grew louder as Ricky breathed even harder.

The Sway mobile home was parked with forty others on a narrow strip on East Street in Tucker Wheel Estates. Mr Tucker owned all the land and most of the trailers, including number 17, which Dianne Sway rented for two hundred and eighty dollars a month.

Ricky ran through the unlocked door and fell onto the couch in the living room. He curled his knees to his stomach as if he were cold, then very slowly placed his right thumb in his mouth.

Mark watched intently. 'Ricky, talk to me,' he said, gently shaking his brother's shoulder. 'You gotta talk to me, man, OK?'

Ricky sucked harder on the thumb. He closed his eyes and his body shook.



Mark looked into the kitchen and realised things were exactly as they had left them an hour ago. An hour ago! It seemed like days. Their schoolbooks were piled on the kitchen table. The daily note from Mom was on the counter next to the phone.

Mark walked to the bathroom and studied his face in the mirror. His left eye was puffy and looked awful. He ran water in the sink and washed a spot of blood from his lower lip.

He took an ice cube from the refrigerator and held it under his eye. Then he walked to the sofa. Ricky was asleep. It was almost five thirty, time for their mother to arrive home after nine long hours at the lamp factory. He sat next to Ricky and, slowly rubbing the ice round his eye, he began to think.

If he didn't call the police on 911, it could be days before anyone found the body. The fatal shot had been severely muffled, and Mark was certain no one heard it but them. The clearing was secluded.

Mark had watched all kinds of rescue shows on television and knew for certain that every 911 call was recorded. He did not want to be recorded. He would never tell anyone, not even his mother, what he had just lived through. And he really needed to discuss the matter with his little brother so they could get their lies straight. 'Ricky,' he said, shaking his brother's leg. 'Ricky, wake up.'

There was no response except a sudden shudder, as if he were freezing. Mark found a quilt in a closet and covered his brother.

He stared at the phone and thought of cowboy-and-Indian movies with bodies lying around and buzzards circling above and everyone concerned about burying the dead before the vultures got them. The thought of the fat lawyer lying out there was horrible enough, but throw in the buzzards — Mark picked up the phone. He punched 911.

'Yeah, there's a dead man, in the woods, and, well, someone needs to come and get him.' He spoke in the deepest voice possible, and knew from the first syllable that it was a pitiful attempt at disguise.

'Who's calling?' It was a female voice, almost like a robot's.

'Uh, I really don't want to say, OK?'

'We need your name, son.' Great, she knew he was a kid. He had hoped he could sound at least like a young teenager.

'Do you want to know about the body or not?' Mark asked.

'Where is the body?'

'It's in the woods between Tucker Wheel Estates and Highway 17. The body is lying on a car in the woods.'

'I need your name, son.' The woman's voice was losing its professional restraint. It had an edge to it now.

'Look, there's a dirt road off Highway 17 that leads to a small

clearing in the woods. The car is big and black, and the dead man is lying on it. If you can't find it, well, tough luck. Bye.'

He hung up and stared at the phone, half expecting squad cars to come flying in from all directions.

Get a grip. He shook Ricky again and, touching his arm, noticed how clammy it was. But Ricky was still sleeping and sucking his thumb. Mark gently grabbed him round the waist and dragged him across the floor, down the narrow hallway to their bedroom, where he shovelled him into bed. Ricky mumbled and quickly curled into a ball again. Mark covered him with a blanket and closed the door.

Mark wrote a note to his mother, told her Ricky felt bad and was sleeping, so please be quiet, and he'd be home in an hour or so.

MARK LIT A CIGARETTE along the trail. This was trouble. Real trouble. He had touched the gun. And the gun had killed the man. It had to be a crime to watch someone commit suicide and not stop it. But he would never tell a soul. Ricky would have to be dealt with. No one would ever know Mark was in the car.

There was a siren in the distance, then the steady thump of a helicopter. Mark crept through the trees and undergrowth, staying low and in no hurry, until he heard voices.

LIGHTS FLASHED EVERYWHERE. Blue for the cops and red for the ambulance. Mark peeked through the woods. The white Memphis police cars were parked round the black Lincoln.

Romey had not been moved, but all four doors were open and the car was being carefully inspected. One cop took pictures. People in uniform were bumping into each other. Radios squawked, just like on television. Finally a stretcher emerged from the ambulance and the paramedics strained to lower Romey onto it.

Mark heard something behind him—the snap of a twig. Then, suddenly, a strong hand grabbed his neck. He jerked round and looked into the face of a cop. He froze and couldn't breathe.

'What're you doing, kid?' the cop asked. 'Stand up, OK? Don't be afraid.'

Mark stood, and the cop released him.

'What're you doing here?' the cop asked.

'Just watching,' Mark said.

The cop placed his arm round Mark's shoulders and led him through the weeds.

'What's your name?'

'Mark Sway. What's yours?'

‘Hardy. Mark Sway, huh,’ the cop repeated thoughtfully. ‘You live in Tucker Wheel Estates, don’t you?’

He hesitated. ‘Yes, sir.’

They joined the circle of policemen in the clearing. ‘Hey, fellas, this is Mark Sway, the kid who made the call,’ Hardy announced. ‘You did make the call, didn’t you, Mark?’

He wanted to lie but doubted it would work. ‘Uh, yes, sir.’

‘How’d you find the body?’

‘My brother and I were playing around here. We just sort of walked up on it.’

‘What time was it?’

‘I don’t remember, really.’

‘What’s your brother’s name?’

‘Ricky.’

‘Where were you and Ricky when you first saw the car?’

Mark pointed to the tree behind him. ‘Under that tree.’

‘What happened to your face?’ Hardy asked.

‘Oh, nothing. Just got in a fight at school.’

‘Did you see this man before he killed himself?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Where were you when you heard the gunshot?’

He started to point to the tree again, but caught himself. ‘We didn’t hear the gunshot. We walked up and found him right here, and we took off home, and I called nine one one.’

‘Why didn’t you give your name to nine one one?’

‘I don’t know. Scared, I guess.’ Mark tried to act pitiful. He was just a kid. ‘I really need to go home. My mom’s probably looking for me.’

Hardy pointed to a police car. ‘Get in. I’ll drive you home.’ He took Mark’s arm and walked him to the car.

DIANNE SWAY HAD CALLED the children’s clinic and was sitting on the edge of Ricky’s bed, biting her nails and waiting for a doctor to call. The nurse said it would be less than ten minutes. Dianne shook Ricky gently again but he was still curled tightly, sucking his thumb. She heard a car door slam and went to the living room.

Mark burst through the door. ‘Hi, Mom.’

‘Where have you been?’ she snapped. ‘What’s wrong with Ricky?’

Sergeant Hardy appeared in the doorway, and she froze.

‘Good evening, ma’am,’ he said.

She glared at Mark. ‘What have you done?’

‘I can explain, Mom. It’s sort of a long story.’

Hardy closed the door behind him, and they stood in the small room looking awkwardly at one another.

'I'm listening.'

'Well, me and Ricky were back in the woods playing this afternoon, and we saw this big black car parked in a clearing, with the motor running. And when we got closer, there was this man lying across the boot, with a gun in his mouth. He was dead.'

'Dead!'

'Suicide, ma'am,' Hardy offered.

'We ran home as fast as we could, and I called nine one one.'

Dianne covered her mouth with her fingers.

'The man's name is Jerome Clifford,' Hardy reported. 'He's from New Orleans, and we have no idea why he came here. He left a note.'

'What did Ricky do?' Dianne asked.

'Well, uh, we just took off running once we saw the body. He moaned and grunted all the way, with his arms straight down. As soon as we got home, he curled up and started sucking his thumb and wouldn't talk. I took him to his bed and covered him.'

The phone rang and Dianne raced for it. From the bedroom, Hardy and Mark listened as she told the doctor about the symptoms and the dead body which the boys had found. She hung up and Hardy met her in the kitchen. 'The doctor wants him at the hospital,' she said in panic.

'I'll call an ambulance,' Hardy said, heading for his car. 'Pack a few of his clothes.'

Dianne glared at Mark. 'Are you telling the truth?' she asked.

'Yes, ma'am.' It would take hours to tell the truth at this point. Once they were alone, he might reconsider and tell the rest of the story; but the cop was here now, and it would get too complicated.

He generally came clean when his mother pressed him. She was only thirty, younger than his friends' moms, and they had been through a lot together. Their brutal ordeals fighting off his father had forged an unusually strong bond between them. It hurt to hide the whole story from her, but the things Romey had told him had nothing to do with Ricky's condition.

'What happened to your eye?'

'I got in a fight in school. It wasn't my fault.'

Hardy lumbered through the door. 'The ambulance'll be here in five minutes. Which hospital?'

'The doctor said to go to St Peter's. He said he would call in a children's psychiatrist to meet us at the hospital.' She nervously lit a cigarette. 'I should pack some clothes for him.'

'You'd better pack clothes for yourself too, ma'am. You might have to stay with him.'

'What about Mark?' she asked.

'What time does your husband get home?'

'I don't have one.'

'Then pack for Mark, too. They might want to keep you overnight.'

A CROWD GATHERED as soon as the ambulance stopped at number 17 East Street. The paramedics went inside.

Hardy laid Ricky on the stretcher and they strapped him down. Ricky moaned twice but never opened his eyes. Dianne gently freed his right arm and made the thumb available. Her eyes were watery but she refused to cry.

They loaded Ricky into the ambulance and Dianne stepped in behind. Mark sat in the front seat of the police car with Hardy, who hit a switch and suddenly blue lights were bouncing off the nearby trailers. The crowd inched away and Hardy gunned the engine. The ambulance followed.

Mark was too worried and scared to be interested in the radios and guns and gadgets. He sat still and kept his mouth shut.

'Are you telling the truth, son?' Hardy suddenly asked.

'Yes, sir. You don't believe me?'

'I didn't say that. It's just a little strange, that's all.'

'What's strange?'

'Several things. First, you made the call but wouldn't give your name. If you and Ricky just stumbled upon the dead man, why not give your name? Second, why did you sneak back to the scene and hide in the woods? Third, if you and Ricky saw the same thing, why has he freaked out and you're in pretty good shape?'

Mark thought for a while and realised he could think of nothing to say. So he said nothing. They were on the interstate heading downtown, the ambulance close behind. It was neat to watch the other cars get out of the way.

'You didn't answer my question,' Hardy finally said.

'Which question?'

'Why didn't you give your name when you made the call?'

'I was scared, OK? The dead body scared me.'

They left the expressway and were now darting through traffic. The tall buildings of downtown Memphis were in sight.

'I just hope you're telling the truth,' Hardy said.

Mark swallowed hard. 'Why don't you believe me?'

'Well, I found some fresh cigarette butts under that tree with the



rope. I figure you kids were under there, having a little smoke, and you saw the whole thing.'

Mark's blood ran cold, but he knew the importance of trying to appear calm. 'Do you arrest kids for smoking cigarettes?'

'No. But kids who lie to cops get in all sorts of trouble.'

'I'm not lying, OK? I've smoked cigarettes there before, but not today. We were just walking through the woods, thinking about maybe having a smoke, and we walked up on the car and Romey.'

Hardy hesitated slightly, then asked, 'Who's Romey?'

Mark braced himself. In a flash, he knew it was over. He'd blown it. Said too much. Keep thinking, he told himself.

'That's what you called the guy, isn't it?'

'No. I told your mother his name was Jerome Clifford.'

'I thought you said it was Romey Clifford.'

The car turned into St Peter's. Hardy parked, and they watched the ambulance back up to the emergency dock.



The Honourable J. Roy Foltrigg, US Attorney for the Southern District of Louisiana at New Orleans, stretched his legs in the rear of his customised Chevrolet van as it raced smoothly along the expressway. Memphis was five hours to the north, straight up Interstate 55. He could have caught a plane, but there were two reasons why he hadn't. First, the paperwork—eighteen different forms—and it would take months to get reimbursed. Second, and more important, he didn't like to fly. He didn't confess this fear, but had purchased this fancy van with his own money and loaded it with appliances—phones, a television, even a fax machine. It was much more comfortable than any limousine.

He slowly kicked off his loafers and watched the night fly by as FBI Special Agent Larry Trumann listened to the telephone stuck in his ear. On the other end of the heavily padded back bench sat Assistant US Attorney Thomas Fink, a loyal Foltrigg subordinate. Fink had worked on the Boyette case eighty hours a week and would handle most of the trial—especially the grunt work—saving, of course, the easy and high-profile parts for his boss. Fink was reading a document, as always, and trying to listen to the mumblings of Agent Trumann, who was seated across from him in a heavy swivel seat. Trumann had Memphis FBI on the phone.

Next to Trumann, in an identical swivel recliner, was rookie Special

Agent Skipper Scherff. He scribbled intently on a legal pad, recording orders, and would do so for the next five hours because, in this tight circle of power, he had absolutely nothing to say.

The chauffeur, Wally Boxx, actually had a licence to practise law though he didn't know how to use it. Officially he was an assistant US attorney, same as Thomas Fink, but in reality he was a fetch-and-carry boy for Foltrigg. He drove Foltrigg's van, carried his briefcase, wrote his speeches and handled the media. Boxx was not stupid. He was deft at political manoeuvring and thoroughly loyal. Foltrigg had a great future and Boxx knew he would be there one day, whispering importantly with the great man as the two of them strolled around Capitol Hill in Washington.

Special Agent Larry Trumann finished the conversation and replaced the phone. Foltrigg waited for him to speak.

'Our guys are trying to convince Memphis Police Department to release the car so we can go over it. Head of the Memphis FBI office is Jason McThune, very tough and persuasive, and he's meeting with the Memphis chief right now. We should have the car within a couple of hours. Single gunshot wound to the head, obviously self-inflicted. Apparently, he tried to do it first with a garden hose in the tail pipe, but for some reason it didn't work. Memphis is checking on the gun.'

'I don't suppose anyone saw it?' Foltrigg asked.

'Evidently not. A couple of kids found the body in a remote area.'

Foltrigg pondered these things. Scherff scribbled furiously.

'What about the note?' Foltrigg asked.

'Well, it could be interesting. The note was handwritten in black ink, and the writing is fairly legible. It's a few paragraphs of instructions to his secretary about the funeral—he wants to be cremated—and where to find his will. Then he apparently tried to add something to the note with a blue Bic pen, but it ran out of ink.'

'What is it?'

'We don't know. The Memphis police still have possession of the note, the gun, some pills—all the physical evidence removed from the car. McThune is trying to get it now.'

'So Jerome Clifford drives to Memphis and blows his brains out,' Foltrigg said. 'Four weeks before trial. Man, oh, man. Muldanno will have a new lawyer by midnight, and by noon tomorrow he'll file for a continuance, claiming the tragic death of Jerome Clifford undermines his constitutional right to a fair trial. It'll be six months before this case goes to trial. Six months! Can you believe it?'

Trumann shook his head in disgust. 'At least it'll give us more time to find the body.'

Fink looked at Agent Trumann. 'We think Clifford knew where the body is. Did you know that?'

Trumann did not know this. 'What makes you think so?'

'Romey and I go way back,' replied the assistant US attorney. 'We were in law school together years ago at Tulane. About a week ago he called me at home to talk about the Muldanno case. He was drunk, out of his head, and kept saying he couldn't go through with the trial. The next morning he called me at the office, scared to death he'd let something slip the night before during his drunken chitchat. Well, I played along and thanked him for the information he had given me—which was nothing. I said I had told Roy, and that Roy had told the FBI, and that the FBI was now trailing him around the clock.'

'This really freaked him out,' Foltrigg added.

'Yeah,' Fink said. 'He called me at home the next day, remarkably sober. I explained that Roy was considering an indictment against him for obstruction of justice and there'd be no way he could represent Muldanno. This set him off. He screamed and cussed for fifteen minutes, then hung up. I never heard from him again.'

'He knows—or he knew—where Muldanno put the body,' Foltrigg added with certainty.

'Why weren't we informed?' Trumann asked.

'We were about to tell you, just before we got the call,' Foltrigg said this with an air of indifference, as if the FBI agent should not question him about such things. 'You guys need to track Clifford's movements from New Orleans to Memphis. Which route did he take? Where did he stop? Who did he see? Surely he must've talked to someone from the time he left New Orleans until he shot himself. Don't you think so?'

Trumann nodded. 'It's a long drive. I'm sure he had to stop along the way.'

Foltrigg crossed his feet. 'He knew where the body is and he obviously planned to commit suicide. There's an outside chance he told someone, don't you think?'

'Maybe.'

'Think about it, Larry. Let's say you're the lawyer, heaven forbid. And you represent a killer who's murdered a United States senator. Let's say that the killer tells you where he hid the body. So two, and only two, people in the entire world know this secret. And you, the lawyer, go off the deep end and decide to kill yourself. Now, would you share your little secret with anyone?'

'Perhaps. I don't know.'

'There's a chance, right?'

'Slight chance.'

'Good,' Foltrigg said. 'If we have a slight chance, then we must investigate it thoroughly. I'd start with his office personnel. Find out when he left New Orleans. Where did he get the gun? Does he have family between here and there? Old lawyer friends along the way? There are a thousand things to check.'

Trumann handed the phone to Agent Scherff. 'Call our office. Get Hightower on the phone.'

Foltrigg was pleased to see the FBI jump when he barked. He grinned smugly at Fink, and stared through the window at the dark Mississippi landscape passing in the night.

A DOCTOR IN A YELLOW jogging suit ran through the swing doors at the end of the emergency hallway and said something to the receptionist. She pointed, and he approached Dianne and Mark and Hardy as they stood in the crowded admissions lobby of St Peter's Charity Hospital. He introduced himself as Dr Simon Greenway. He was a psychiatrist, he said, and had been called moments earlier by Dr Sage, the family's paediatrician. Dianne needed to come with him. Sergeant Hardy said he would stay with Mark.

The doctor and Dianne hurried away, down the hallway, dodging nurses and darting round trolleys. It was a few minutes after seven.

'Are you hungry, Mark?' Hardy asked.

He wasn't, but he wanted to leave this place. 'Maybe a little.'

'Let's go to the cafeteria. I'll buy you a cheeseburger.'

They walked through a busy hallway and down a flight of stairs to the basement. Another hall led to a crowded cafeteria. Hardy pointed to the only empty table in view, and Mark waited there.

Mark was worried about Ricky, although Hardy had explained that he was in no danger of dying. He said that some doctors would talk to him and try to bring him round. But it could take time. He said that it was important for the doctors to know exactly what had happened and that if the doctors were not told the truth, then it could be severely damaging to Ricky and his mental condition.

Mark could think of little except Ricky and whether he would start talking. He desperately wanted this to happen, but he also wanted to have first crack at Ricky. They had things to discuss. What if the doctors or the cops got to Ricky first, and Ricky told the whole story, and they all knew Mark was lying? What would they do then? Mark wished he'd simply told the truth to the cops and to his mother. He could have explained everything that Ricky saw. And the secret would still be safe because Ricky didn't know it.

Hardy appeared with a tray of French fries and cheeseburgers. Mark nibbled on a French fry. Hardy launched into a burger.

'So what happened to your face?' Hardy asked, chomping away.

Mark rubbed the bump and remembered he had been wounded in the fray. 'Oh, nothing. Just got in a fight at school.'

'Did you get in trouble for this fight? I mean, did your teacher take you to the principal's office, or anything like that?'

'No. It happened when school was out.'

'What's the other kid's name?'

'Why do you want to know his name?'

'I just want to know. It's my job, OK?'

'You think I'm lying, don't you?' Mark tried to look pitiful.

'I don't know, kid. Your story is full of holes.'

'I can't remember everything. It happened so fast. You expect me to give every little detail, and I can't remember it that way.'

Hardy stuck a wad of fries in his mouth. 'Eat your food. We'd better get back.'

'Thanks for the dinner.'

RICKY WAS IN A PRIVATE ROOM on the ninth floor, in the psychiatric wing. The lights were dim and it was very quiet. The nurses' station was near the elevators, and those stepping off were scrutinised. A security guard whispered with the nurses and watched the hallways. Down from the elevators, away from the rooms, was a small dark sitting area with a television and soft-drink machines.

Mark and Hardy were alone in the waiting area. Mark sipped a Sprite and watched a rerun of *Hill Street Blues* while Hardy dozed on the couch. It was almost nine, half an hour since Dianne had walked Mark down the hall to Ricky's room for a quick peek. Ricky looked small under the sheets. Dianne assured him Ricky would be all right, but Mark knew she was worried. As they walked back to the sitting area he almost blurted out a confession. But he didn't.

A pretty nurse walked past the elevators and motioned for Mark to follow her. She had blonde hair and a perfect smile, and she was young. Her name was Karen. His heart skipped a beat.

'Dr Greenway wants to talk to you,' she said, and walked him to Ricky's room, number 943.

Dr Greenway now wore a shirt and tie and a white lab jacket. He was a skinny man with round glasses and a black beard, and seemed too young to be doing this.

'Come in, Mark,' he said. 'Sit here.' He pointed to a plastic chair next to a foldaway bed. Dianne sat on Ricky's bed with her feet



curled under her. A lamp on a table provided the only light.

Mark eased into the plastic chair and Dr Greenway sat on the edge of the foldaway bed, not two feet away. 'I need to talk to you about what happened,' he said. 'What did Ricky see this afternoon?'

'Is this in secret?'

'Yes. Anything you tell me is strictly confidential.'

Maybe a good dose of the truth would help everyone, especially Ricky. Mark looked at the small blond head on the pillow with hair sticking in all directions. Why, oh, why didn't they just run when the black car pulled up and parked? He was suddenly hit with guilt and his lip quivered. All of this was his fault. It was time to tell all.

Mark started with the cigarettes. His mother shook her head but never said a word. He described the tree and the clearing. Then the car. He left out a chunk of the story but did admit crawling to the car to remove the hose, saying that Ricky cried and begged him not to do it. Then he told how the man stormed out of the car, saw the hose in the weeds and crawled on the boot and shot himself.

'How far away was Ricky?' Greenway asked.

'He was very close.'

'You actually saw the man shoot himself?' Dianne asked in disbelief.

'Yes.'

She looked at Ricky. 'No wonder.'

'What did Ricky do when the shot was fired?'

Mark explained with dead accuracy how Ricky had frozen, then started away in an awkward jog, arms straight down, moaning. Mark closed his eyes. It felt wonderful to be so truthful.

SERGEANT HARDY HUDDLED with his lieutenant and Special Agent Jason McThune of the FBI in the sitting area next to the soft-drink machines. Lieutenant Byrd explained to Hardy that it was now an FBI matter, that print experts had finished dusting the car and found lots of fingerprints too small for an adult, and they needed to know if Mark had dropped any clues or changed his story.

'No. But I'm not convinced he's telling the truth,' Hardy said.

'Has he touched anything we can take?' McThune asked. 'We suspect the kid was in the car at some point. We need to lift his prints from something and see if they match.'

Hardy pointed to a rubbish bin by the chair Mark had sat in. 'There. The Sprite can. He drank a Sprite while sitting right there.'

McThune carefully wrapped a handkerchief round the can and placed it in his pocket. 'I'll run this to our fingerprint men,' he said.

DR GREENWAY SAT in a chair near the bed and studied his notes. 'I'm gonna leave now, but I'll be back early in the morning. He's stable and I expect little change through the night.' He looked at Dianne. 'It's a severe case of acute post-traumatic-stress disorder.'

'What does that mean?' Mark asked. Dianne rubbed her temples and kept her eyes closed.

'Ricky was badly scared, and when he saw the man shoot himself he was suddenly exposed to a terrifying experience that he couldn't handle. It shocked his mind and body.' He paused and placed his notes on the bed. 'There's not a lot we can do right now. I expect him to come round tomorrow—or the next day at the latest—and we'll start talking about things. It may take some time.'

'How will you treat him?' Dianne asked.

'We have to make him feel safe. It's imperative that both of you stay in this room as much as possible for the next several days. He'll need emotional and physical support from you.'

'When do you think we might go home?' Dianne asked.

'As soon as possible. Maybe a week. Maybe two.'

'I, uh, I have a job,' she said. 'I don't know what to do.'

'I'll contact your employer first thing in the morning.'

'What about school?' Mark asked.

'Your mother has given me the name of the principal. I'll call first thing in the morning and talk to your teachers.'

Dianne was rubbing her temples again. A nurse—not the pretty one—entered and handed her two pills and a cup of water.

'It's Dalmane,' Greenway said. 'It should help you rest. I'll see you guys in the morning. Get some sleep.'

The nurse left. Greenway stood and smiled for the first time, then closed the door behind him.

They were alone. Mark moved closer to his mother and leaned on her shoulder. She patted his arm. 'It'll be all right, Mark. We've been through worse.'

'I'm sorry, Mom.' His eyes watered and he was ready for a cry. She squeezed him and held him tight for a long minute. He sobbed quietly with his face buried in her shirt.

She lay down gently on the cheap foam mattress, with Mark still in her arms. She was exhausted. Nine hours of packing plastic lamps into cardboard boxes, five hours of a full-blown crisis, and now the Dalmane. Mark had stopped crying. She was ready for a deep sleep.

'Will you get fired, Mom?' he asked. He worried about the family finances as much as she did.

'I don't think so. We'll worry about it tomorrow.'

'We need to talk, Mom.'

'I know, Mark. But let's do it in the morning. I'm very tired now.' Her eyes were already closed and she relaxed her grip.

Mark was wide awake. He thought of Romey. Where was he now? He stared at the wall, and thought of Hardy and the police. Was he under surveillance, like on television? Surely not.

Mark was a thinker, a worrier, and when sleep came and went or wouldn't come at all, he went for long secret walks. He loved to sit on a hill above the park on clear nights—the excursions brought him much pleasure and peace. The fear of getting caught by his mother had vanished years ago. She worked hard and slept soundly.

He slipped quietly out of the room. The hall was dark and empty. Karen was at the nurses' desk. She smiled beautifully at him and he told her he wanted to go for some orange juice in the cafeteria. He'd be back in a minute. He took the empty elevator to the basement.

The cafeteria was almost deserted. A man with casts on both legs sat stiffly in a wheelchair at one table. A band of thick gauze covered the top of his head. He looked terribly uncomfortable.

Mark paid for a pint of juice and sat at a table near the man. He tried not to stare. The man grimaced and tried to adjust his legs.

A man with a white shirt and tie appeared from nowhere with a coffee and sat at the injured guy's table. 'Bad injury,' he said with a large smile. 'What happened?'

'Car wreck,' came the somewhat anguished reply. 'Got hit by a truck. Nut ran a stop sign.'

The man handed him a white card. 'My name's Gill Teal. I'm a lawyer and I specialise in auto accidents—especially cases involving large trucks.' He thrust his hand across the table.

The guy reached to shake hands. 'Joe Farris.'

Gill pumped his hand. 'What you got—two broken legs, concussion, coupla puncture wounds?'

'And broken collarbone.'

'Great. Then we're looking at permanent disability. What type of work do you do?' Gill asked, rubbing his chin in careful analysis.

'Crane operator.'

'Union?'

'Yeah.'

'Wow.' Gill made frantic notes on a napkin, then smiled at Joe and announced, 'I can get you at least six hundred thousand. I take only a third and you walk away with four hundred thousand. Minimum. Tax-free, of course. We'll file suit tomorrow.'

'I've talked to some other lawyers,' Joe said.

'I can get you more than anybody. Not bragging, Joe, but I'm the best in town when it comes to these cases.'

Joe stared at the table. 'I'll think about it.'

'Time is critical, Joe. Can I call you tomorrow?'

Joe shook his head. 'No.'

'Why not?'

'I can't sleep now for all the damned lawyers calling. There are more lawyers around this place than doctors.'

Gill was unmoved. 'There are a lot of sharks out here, Joe. Sad but true. But look in the Yellow Pages. There's a full-page three-colour ad for me. Look up Gill Teal, and you'll see who's for real.'

'I'll think about it.'

Gill handed Joe another card, said goodbye and left.

Joe slowly rolled himself away. Both of Gill's cards were on the table. Mark finished his juice, glanced round and picked one up.

MARK TOLD KAREN that he couldn't sleep and would be watching television if anyone needed him. He sat on the couch in the waiting area and flipped through the phone book. Mr Gill Teal did indeed have a full-page ad in the Memphis Yellow Pages. There was a nice picture of him standing outside a courthouse with his jacket off and sleeves rolled up. 'I Fight for Your Rights!' it said under the photo.

Mark closed the phone book and decided to go to sleep.

Tomorrow he might call Gill Teal.

ROY FOLTRIGG LIKED to be escorted. He especially enjoyed those priceless moments when the cameras were waiting for him. He would stroll majestically through the hall or down the courthouse steps—with Wally Boxx in front, like a pit bull, and another assistant by his side, brushing off idiotic questions. His timing was usually perfect.

As he entered the Federal Building on Main Street in Memphis, a few minutes after midnight, he had an escort of sorts—with Wally and Fink and Agents Trumann and Scherff—but there were no anxious reporters. In fact, not a soul waited for him until he entered the offices of the FBI, where Jason McThune sipped stale coffee with two other weary agents. So much for grand entrances.

Introductions were handled quickly. McThune, a twenty-year FBI man, was tired and irritated because it was late. He'd heard of Foltrigg, and rumour described him as a pompous ass.

McThune fell into his seat behind the desk. He covered the basics: the finding of the car, the contents of it, the gun, the wound, the time of death, and on and on. 'Kid's name is Mark Sway. He told

Memphis PD he and his younger brother happened upon the body and ran to call the authorities. We know he's lying because his fingerprints are all over the car. It's obvious the kid was inside. We've also found prints above the exhaust pipe. And there were also fresh cigarette butts under a tree near the car—Virginia Slims, the same brand used by Dianne Sway. We figure the kids went for a smoke. When Clifford appears from nowhere, they hide and watch him—maybe sneak around and pull out the hose, we're not sure.'

McThune lifted a yellow notepad from the wreckage on his desk. 'Anyway, Clifford fired at least one shot from inside the car. No idea why, and no idea when it was done. The autopsy was finished an hour ago, and Clifford was full of Dalmane and Percodan. Plus his blood-alcohol content was point two two, so he was drunk and stoned. We're not tracking a rational mind.'

'I understand that.' Roy Foltrigg nodded impatiently.

McThune ignored him. 'The gun's a cheap thirty-eight purchased illegally at a pawnshop here in Memphis. A purchase of gasoline in Vaiden, Mississippi. No other evidence of any stops. His secretary says he left the office around nine in the morning and she didn't hear a word until we called.'

'Why Memphis?' Wally Boxx asked.

'Because he was born here,' McThune said solemnly while staring at Foltrigg, as if everyone prefers to die in the place of their birth. It was a humorous response delivered by a serious face, and Foltrigg missed it all. McThune had heard he was not too bright.

After a pause McThune went on. 'The note was handwritten with a black felt-tip pen of some sort.' He handed a sheet of paper to Foltrigg, who studied it.

It looked as though Clifford tried to add something with a blue ball point, but it was out of ink. Foltrigg's nose got closer to the note. 'It says, "Mark, Mark, where are," and I can't make out the rest of it.'

'Right. We found the pen in the car. Cheap Bic.'

'So what does it mean?'

'A few hours ago Mark Sway rode to the hospital with Sergeant Hardy of the Memphis PD. Along the way he let it slip that Romey said or did something. Romey. Short for Jerome, according to Mr Clifford's secretary. How would the kid know the nickname unless Clifford himself told him?'

'What do you think?' Foltrigg asked.

'Well, my theory is that the kid was in the car before Clifford shot himself, and that he and Clifford talked about something. Then at



some point the kid leaves the car. Clifford tries to add something to his note, and shoots himself.'

'Why would the kid lie?'

'One, he's scared. Two, he's a kid. Three, maybe Clifford told him something he doesn't need to know.'

McThune's delivery was perfect, and the dramatic punch line left a heavy silence in the room. Foltrigg froze. Boxx and Fink stared blankly at the desk with open mouths. Finally, Foltrigg cleared his throat. 'Have you talked to the kid?'

'No. I plan to in a few hours. Trumann and I will go to the hospital around nine or so and talk to the kid and his mother.' McThune glanced at his watch and stood. 'Gentlemen, it's late. Our people will finish with the car by noon and I suggest we meet then.'

'We must know everything Mark Sway knows,' Roy said without moving. 'He was in that car, and Clifford talked to him.'

'I know that.'

'Yes, Mr McThune, but there are some things you don't know. Clifford knew the location of the body and he was talking about it.'

'There are a lot of things I don't know, Mr Foltrigg, because this is a New Orleans case and I work Memphis, you understand. I'll work on the case until noon tomorrow. Then my pal Larry Trumann here can have it. I'll be finished.'

'Unless, of course, you get a call from Washington.'

'Yes, unless of course I get a call from Washington. Then I'll do whatever Mr Voyles tells me.'

F. Denton Voyles was the director of the FBI.

'I talk to Mr Voyles every week,' replied Foltrigg. 'The Boyette case is the FBI's top priority at this moment, according to him.'

'So I've heard.'

Roy stood and stared at McThune. 'It is imperative that we know everything Mark Sway knows. Do you understand?'

McThune returned the stare and said nothing.



Karen had covered Mark with a blanket and checked on him throughout the night. She brought him orange juice around eight and woke him gently. He stood and stretched.

'Come with me. Dr Greenway wants to see you.' Karen took his hand and they walked to Ricky's room.

Dianne looked tired as she stood at the foot of Ricky's bed. Mark

stood next to her and watched as Greenway rubbed Ricky's forehead and spoke to him. He was not responding. 'He's almost comatose. A most severe case,' Greenway said.

'What's next?' Dianne asked.

'We wait. There's no physical danger. He'll come around, and when he does he'll be frightened. It's imperative that you be here. He needs to see and feel his mother. Hold him, reassure him. Mark can come and go a bit, but it's best if he stays here as much as possible too.'

Mark nodded his head. The thought of spending another minute in the room was painful.

Greenway reached into his bag and produced a newspaper, the *Memphis Press*. On the front page was a photo of W. Jerome Clifford and the headline NEW ORLEANS LAWYER COMMITS SUICIDE IN NORTH MEMPHIS. A smaller headline said FLAMBOYANT LAWYER WITH SUSPECTED MOB TIES. The word 'mob' jumped out at Mark.

Greenway lowered his voice. 'It seems as though Mr Clifford was involved in the Senator Boyette case. He was the attorney for the man charged with the murder. Have you kept up with the story?'

Dianne shook her head.

'Well, it's a big case. The first US senator to be murdered in office. There are police and FBI downstairs. They want to talk to Mark, and of course they want you present.'

'Why?' she asked.

'The Boyette case is complicated. I think you'll understand more after you read the story here. I told them you and Mark could not speak with them until I say so. Is this all right?'

'Yes,' Mark blurted. 'I don't want to talk to them. I may end up like Ricky if these cops keep bugging me.' For some reason Mark had known the police would return with a lot of questions. But mention of the FBI suddenly sent chills over him, and he needed to sit down.

'Keep them away for now,' Dianne said to Greenway.

'They asked if they could see you at nine, and I said no. But they won't go away.' He looked at his watch. 'I'll be here at noon. I'll put them off until then. Just stay by this bed until I return.'

DIANNE FINISHED THE STORY about Mr Clifford and handed the paper to Mark. 'His client killed a United States senator,' she said in awe. 'It says Jerome Clifford had ties with the New Orleans mob and that his client is widely thought to be a member.'

Mark had seen *The Godfather* on television. In fact, he'd even seen the sequel to *The Godfather*, and he knew all about the mob. Scenes from the movies flashed before his eyes. His heart pounded.

'I'm hungry, Mom. Are you hungry?'

'Why didn't you tell me the truth, Mark?'

'Because the cop was in the trailer, and it wasn't a good time to talk. I'm sorry. I planned to tell you as soon as we were alone.'

She looked sad. 'You never lie to me, Mark.'

Never say never. 'Can we talk about this later, Mom? I'm hungry. Give me a couple of bucks, and I'll run down to the cafeteria and get some doughnuts.' He was on his feet, waiting for the money.

Fortunately, she was not in the mood for a serious talk about truthfulness and such. She opened her purse and gave him a five-dollar bill. 'Where's the cafeteria?'

'Basement. Madison Wing. I've been there twice.'

'Why am I not surprised? I suppose you've been all over this place.'

'Yes, ma'am. We're on the quietest floor.'

MARK ATE FOUR DOUGHNUTS and watched his mother try to nap on the bed. He kissed her on the forehead and told her he needed to roam around a bit. She told him not to leave the hospital.

He used the stairs because he figured Hardy and the FBI might be hanging around somewhere downstairs, waiting for him to happen by.

Like most big-city charity hospitals, St Peter's had been built over time and was a sprawling, bewildering configuration of additions and wings with a maze of hallways connecting them. Mark darted through now-familiar territory and exited through a small lobby on Monroe Avenue. He'd studied a map in the phone book, and knew Gill Teal's office was on the third floor of a building four blocks away.

A new strategy was developing. What was wrong, he asked himself, with making an anonymous phone call to the FBI and telling them where the body was? If Romey wasn't lying then the body would be found and the killer would go to jail.

There were risks. Anybody on the other end of the phone would know he was just a kid. The FBI would record him and analyse his voice. The Mafia wasn't stupid.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea.

He turned onto Third Street and darted into the Sterick Building. He entered the elevator with a crowd of people wearing nice clothes and carrying briefcases, and punched the button for the third floor.

His stop was first. He stepped into a small lobby, went left and found Mr Teal's office at the end of the hall. The words GILL TEAL—THE PEOPLE'S LAWYER were painted in bold black letters from the top of the door to the bottom.

Mark swallowed and entered the office. The small waiting room

was filled with sad people suffering from all sorts of injuries and wounds. There were no empty seats, and one poor man in a neck brace sat on the cluttered coffee table. It was worse than the emergency room at St Peter's.

Mr Teal certainly had been busy rounding up clients. Mark decided to leave when someone called out, 'What do you want?'

It was a large lady behind the receptionist's window. He stepped to the window and looked at the scowling face.

'I'd like to see Mr Teal,' he said softly.

'Oh, you would. Do you have an appointment?'

'No, ma'am.'

She glared at him from head to toe. 'What type of injury is it?'

'I, uh—I don't have an injury.'

'Well, you're in the wrong place. Mr Teal only takes cases involving death or injuries. Now please go bother someone else.'

'Sure. And if I get hit by a truck, I'll come back to see you.' He walked through the carnage and made a quick exit.

He took the stairs down and explored the second floor. More lawyers. On one door he counted twenty-two bronze names. Lawyers on top of lawyers. Surely one of these guys could help him?

A security guard suddenly appeared and walked slowly towards him. Mark glanced at the next door. The words REGGIE LOVE—LAWYER were painted on it in small letters, and he casually turned the doorknob and stepped inside.

The small reception area was quiet. Two chairs and a sofa sat round a glass table. A young man with a tie but no coat stood up from his desk behind some potted trees and walked a few steps forward. 'May I help you?' he asked quite pleasantly.

'Yes. I need to see a lawyer.'

'You're a bit young to need a lawyer, aren't you?'

'Yes. But I'm having some problems. Are you Reggie Love?'

'No. I'm her secretary. What's your name?'

He was her secretary. Reggie was a she. The secretary was a he. 'Uh, Mark Sway. You're a secretary?'

'And a paralegal, among other things.' A nameplate on the desk identified him as Clint Van Hooser.

'So you're not a lawyer?'

'No. Reggie's the lawyer.'

'Then I need to speak with Reggie.'

'She's busy right now. You can have a seat.' He waved at the sofa, amused by this kid's needing a lawyer. 'I'll tell her you're here. Maybe she can see you for a minute.'

'It's very important. I'm supposed to talk to the FBI at noon.'

This was good enough. 'Have a seat. It'll be a minute.'

As soon as Clint disappeared, Mark took a yellow phone book from the magazine rack beside the sofa and flipped to the attorneys. There was Gill Teal again in his full-page spread. Pages and pages of huge ads, all crying out for injured people. Then half-page ones, then quarter-page. Reggie Love was not among them. What kind of lawyer was she?

Reggie Love was one of thousands in the Memphis Yellow Pages. She couldn't be much of a lawyer if the Yellow Pages thought so little of her, and the thought of racing from the office crossed his mind. But then there was Gill Teal, the star of the Yellow Pages, and just look at his office. No, he decided, he'd take his chances with Reggie Love. Maybe she had more time to help him.

CLINT CLOSED THE DOOR behind him and eased across the Persian rug to the desk where Reggie Love was on the phone, listening more than talking. Clint signalled to indicate someone was waiting.

Reggie Love was fifty-two years old and had been practising law for less than five years. She was of medium build with very short, very grey hair with a fringe that fell almost to the top of her perfectly round black-framed glasses. The eyes were green, and they glowed at Clint as if something funny had been said.

When she finally hung up, Clint said with a smile, 'Got a new client for you.'

'I don't need new clients, Clint. I need clients who can pay. What's the name?'

'Mark Sway. He's just a kid—ten, maybe twelve, years old. And he says he's supposed to meet with the FBI at noon.'

Reggie stood and walked round the desk. 'Show him in. And rescue me in fifteen minutes, OK? I've got a busy morning.'

Clint opened the door and motioned for Mark to enter.

The first thing Mark noticed about her was her hair. He'd never seen a woman with grey hair worn so short. She wasn't old and she wasn't young.

She smiled appropriately as they met at the door. 'Mark, I'm Reggie Love.' She offered her hand; he took it reluctantly, and she squeezed hard and shook firm. Shaking hands with women was not something he did often. She was neither tall nor short, thin nor heavy. Her dress was straight and black, and she wore black and gold bracelets on both wrists. They rattled.

'Nice to meet you,' he said weakly. She was already leading him to



a corner of the office where two soft chairs faced a table with picture books on it.

‘Have a seat,’ she said. ‘I only have a minute.’

Mark sat on the edge of his seat and was suddenly terrified. He’d lied to his mother. He’d lied to the police. He’d lied to Dr Greenway. He was about to lie to the FBI. Maybe it was time to come clean for a change. Sometimes it was frightening to tell the truth, but he usually felt better afterwards. But the thought of unloading all this baggage on a stranger made his blood run cold.

‘Would you like something to drink?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘Mark Sway, right? Please do not call me ma’am, all right? My name is not Ms Love or any of that. My name is Reggie, OK?’

‘OK.’

‘How old are you, Mark? Tell me a little about yourself.’

‘I’m eleven. I’m in the fifth grade at Willow Road.’

‘Why aren’t you in school this morning?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘I see. Clint said you’re supposed to meet with the FBI at noon. Is this true?’

‘Yes. They want to ask me some questions at the hospital.’

She picked up a legal pad from the table and wrote something on it. ‘The hospital?’

‘It’s part of the long story. Can I ask you something, Reggie?’

‘Sure.’ She had pretty eyes and they sparkled at him.

‘If I tell you something, will you ever repeat it?’ he asked.

‘Of course not. It’s privileged, confidential.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means simply that I can never repeat anything you tell me unless you tell me I can repeat it. It’s like talking to your doctor or minister. The conversations are secret and held in trust.’

‘What if I told you something the police really want to know?’

‘I can’t repeat it.’ His determination made her wonder.

Mark looked at her without blinking for a long minute.

‘Any more questions?’ she asked.

‘Yeah. Where’d you get the name Reggie?’

‘I changed my name several years ago. It was Regina and I was married to a doctor. And then all sorts of bad things happened and we were divorced—so I changed my name to Reggie.’

‘My parents are divorced. My father drank a lot and beat us. Beat Mom too. Me and Ricky always hated him.’

‘Ricky’s your brother?’

'Yes. He's the one in the hospital.'

'What's the matter with him?'

Mark hesitated a few seconds and thought about a few things. He wasn't quite ready to tell all. 'How much do you charge?'

'I don't know. What kind of case is it?'

'What kind of cases do you take?'

'Mostly cases involving abused or neglected children. I get some pretty bad cases.'

'Good, because this is a really bad one. One person is dead. One is in the hospital. The police and FBI want to talk to me.'

'Look, Mark, I assume you don't have a lot of money to hire me, do you?'

'No.'

'Technically, you're supposed to pay me something as a retainer, and once this is done I'm your lawyer. Do you have a dollar?'

'Yes.' Mark pulled out a one-dollar bill and handed it to her.

She laid it on the table and said, 'OK, now I'm the lawyer and you're the client. Let's hear the story.'

He reached into his pocket again and pulled out a folded article from the newspaper Greenway had given them. He handed it to her. 'Have you seen this?' he asked. His hand was trembling.

'No. I haven't seen the paper yet.' She took the article and read it. 'OK,' she said when she finished.

'It mentions the body was found by two boys. Well, that's me and Ricky. But there's much more to the story.'

Her pen was ready. 'I want to hear it now.'

Mark was scared but he also knew he would feel much better when it was over.

Clint attempted to interrupt after fifteen minutes, but Reggie frowned at him. He quickly closed the door and disappeared.

THE FIRST ACCOUNT took twenty minutes, with few interruptions from Reggie. There were gaps and holes—none the fault of Mark—just soft spots that she picked through during the second pass, which took another twenty minutes. As the conversation unfolded, it became obvious to Reggie that Mark knew where the body of Senator Boyd Boyette was allegedly buried, and she skilfully and fearfully danced round this information. Maybe she would ask; maybe she wouldn't. But it would be the last thing discussed.

An hour after they started, she took a break and read the newspaper story twice. It seemed to fit. He knew too many details to be lying. And the poor kid was scared to death.

'What are you afraid of, Mark?' she asked.

'Lots of things. I've lied to the police about this and I think they know I'm lying. My little brother's in a coma because of me. I lied to his doctor and that scares me. I don't know what to do and I guess that's why I'm here. What should I do?'

'Do you know where the body is buried?'

'I think so. I know what Jerome Clifford told me.'

'Do you want to tell me where it is?' she asked.

'Do you want me to?'

'I'm not sure. What keeps you from telling me?'

'I don't want anybody to know that I know, because Romey told me his client had killed many people and was planning on killing Romey too. If I tell this stuff to the cops, he'll come after me. He's in the Mafia and that really scares me. Wouldn't it scare you?'

'I think so.'

'And the cops have threatened me if I don't tell the truth. Do you think I should tell the FBI?'

Reggie had no wonderful advice at this point. If she suggested that he tell the FBI and he followed her advice, his life could indeed be in danger. There was no law requiring him to tell. Obstruction of justice, maybe, but he was just a kid. They didn't know for certain what he knew, and if they couldn't prove it, he was safe.

'Let's do this, Mark. Don't tell me where the body is, OK? And let's meet with the FBI and listen to them. You won't have to say a word. And when it's over, you and I will decide what to do next.'

'Sounds good to me.'

'Does your mother know you're here?'

'No. I need to call her.'

Reggie found the number in the phone book and dialled the hospital. Mark explained to Dianne that he had gone for a walk. He was a smooth liar, Reggie noticed.

He hung up, looking disturbed. 'Mom's upset. Ricky's coming out of the coma and she can't find Dr Greenway.'

'I'll walk with you to the hospital.' Reggie threw two fresh legal pads into her briefcase. She was suddenly nervous.

THE SCENE WAS FRIGHTENING at first. Ricky was moaning and grunting, twisting and jerking. His eyes were open, then shut. Dianne pressed her head to his and spoke softly through her tears. 'It's OK, baby. It's OK. Mommy's here.' She managed a quick smile at Mark.

Greenway stood close by, arms folded, rubbing his beard.

After a few long minutes Ricky opened his eyes, seemed to notice

and recognise his mother, and grew still. She kissed him on the forehead. Greenway looked at Mark and nodded at the door. Mark followed him outside, into the quiet hallway.

'He woke up about two hours ago,' the doctor explained. 'It looks like he's coming out of it slowly. He's mumbled a lot, which is a good sign, but he hasn't made any words yet.'

This was comforting, in a sense. Mark would have to stick close to the room just in case. 'So he's gonna be OK?'

'I think so, but it could take time.' There was a long pause. 'The FBI is bugging me,' Greenway finally said.

Join the club, Mark thought. 'Where are they?'

'Room twenty-eight. It's a small conference room on the second floor. They sounded very serious. They said they'd be expecting me, you and your mother at noon.'

'I'm ready for them,' Mark said proudly. 'I've hired us a lawyer. She's here now, down the hall.'

'How'd you find a lawyer?'

'It's a long story. But I paid her myself.'

Greenway glanced at his watch, then started back into the room. 'Well, your mother cannot leave Ricky right now, under any circumstances. And I certainly need to stay close.'

'No problem. You take care of Ricky and Mom, and me and the lawyer'll take care of the FBI.'

REGGIE HAD FOUND an empty room on the eighth floor for them to use. They were already ten minutes late when she closed the door quickly and said, 'Pull up your shirt.'

He began pulling at his bulky sweatshirt while she opened her briefcase and removed a small black tape recorder. She checked the cassette tape, then punched the buttons. Mark watched every move. She'd used this device many times before, he could tell. She pressed the recorder to his stomach and said, 'Hold it right here.' Then she threaded a plastic strap through a clip on the recorder, wrapped it round his midsection and back, and fastened it snugly.

He tucked his sweatshirt into his jeans. Reggie took a step back and stared at his stomach. 'Perfect,' she said. 'Let's go.'

She grabbed her briefcase and they were out the door.

'How do you know they won't frisk me?' he asked, very anxious.

'Because they're here to talk, not to arrest. Just trust me.'

'I trust you, but I'm really scared.'

'You'll do fine, Mark. Just remember what I told you.'

They took the stairs to the second floor. The narrow corridors were





swarming with the usual anxious traffic of nurses and doctors and patients rolling along in wheelchairs. They found room 28.

They retreated a step or two and Reggie opened an identical door to room 24, an abandoned coffee room. 'I'll wait in here.' She carefully felt the recorder and worked her fingers round it until she pushed the button. 'Now go,' she instructed.

Mark took a deep breath and knocked on the door. 'Come in,' someone said, and the voice was not friendly. Mark opened the door slowly, stepped inside and closed it behind him. The room was narrow and long, just like the table in the centre of it. The two men who stood at the table could pass for twins—white button-down shirts, red and blue ties, dark trousers, short hair. 'You must be Mark,' one man said. 'I'm Jason McThune, FBI, Memphis.'

'And I'm Larry Trumann,' said the other. 'FBI, New Orleans. Have a seat, Mark.' Mark carefully sat down, terrified the tape recorder would somehow fall off.

They moved their chairs to within inches of him. Mark figured it was part of the game. 'We, uh . . . we really expected your mother and Dr Greenway to be here,' Trumann said, glancing at McThune.

'They're with my brother. Mom can't leave his room right now. We can wait a day or two until she's available,' Mark offered.

'No, Mark, we really need to talk now. Just the three of us. We want to ask you some questions about yesterday.'

'Do I need a lawyer?'

They looked at each other with open mouths. At least five seconds passed before McThune said, 'Of course not.'

'Why not?'

'Well, we just want to ask you a few questions. That's all.'

'Don't you think we should wait until my mother can be here?'

They exchanged matching little smiles and McThune said, 'Not really, Mark. I mean, we can wait if you want to, but you're a smart kid and we're really in a hurry here. We just have a few questions.'

'OK. I guess. If I have to.'

Trumann went first. 'Good. You told the Memphis police that Jerome Clifford was already dead when you and Ricky found the car yesterday. Now, Mark, is this really the truth?'

Mark fidgeted. 'What happens if I don't answer?'

They were on shaky ground. Children are not to be interviewed without first talking to the parents. But she didn't show up. McThune frowned. 'Mark, have you ever heard of obstruction of justice?'

'I don't think so.'

'Well, it's a crime, OK? A person who knows something about a

crime and withholds this information from the FBI or the police might be found guilty of obstruction of justice.'

'So, if I don't answer your question, I might go to jail?'

Trumann retreated a bit. The ice was getting thinner. 'Why don't you want to answer the question, Mark?'

'I'm just scared. I'm eleven years old, and my mom's not here. If you were in my place, would you want a lawyer?'

'No,' McThune said. 'I would never want a lawyer. They're just a pain. If you have nothing to hide, you don't need a lawyer.'

Trumann leaned towards him with a drippy smile. 'Mark, was Jerome Clifford already dead when you and Ricky found him?'

'I take the Fifth Amendment.'

The drippy smile vanished. McThune's face reddened. There was a long pause as the agents stared at each other.

Trumann finally spoke. 'Are you gonna answer any questions, Mark? Because if not, then we have to go and talk to the judge. Convince him to require you to talk to us. It's pretty nasty, really.'

'I need to go to the rest room,' Mark said as he stood up.

'Sure, Mark,' Trumann said, afraid they'd made him sick. 'I think it's down the hall.' Mark left the room and closed the door behind him.

FOR SEVENTEEN MINUTES the agents made small talk and played with their pens. They weren't worried. They were experienced agents with many tricks. They'd been here before. He would talk.

A knock, and McThune said, 'Come in.'

An attractive lady of fifty or so walked in and closed the door as if this were her office. They scrambled to their feet. She placed her briefcase on the table, handed each agent a card and said, 'My name is Reggie Love. I'm an attorney and I represent Mark Sway.'

'When did he hire you?' McThune said as he looked wildly at Trumann.

'That's really none of your business, is it now? Sit down.' She eased gracefully into a seat. They backed awkwardly into theirs.

'Where's, uh . . . where's Mark?' Trumann asked.

'He's off somewhere taking the Fifth. Can I see your ID?'

They instantly produced their badges. She studied them, wrote something on a legal pad and asked, 'Did you in fact attempt to interrogate this child outside the presence of his mother?'

'No,' said Trumann.

'He tells me you did.'

'He's confused,' said McThune. 'This meeting was supposed to include Mark, Dianne Sway and the doctor.'

'But the kid showed up alone,' Trumann added quickly. 'We asked where his mother was and he said she couldn't make it right now, and we sort of thought she was on her way or something, so we were just chitchatting with the kid while we waited.'

'Did you advise Mark to talk to a lawyer?'

'It wasn't mentioned,' Trumann said, shrugging innocently.

Reggie slowly opened her briefcase and lifted out the black-recorder and the cassette tape. She set them in front of her. McThune and Trumann seemed to shrink in their seats.

'It's all right here on tape, fellas. You boys attempted to interrogate a child outside the presence of his mother and without her consent. You attempted to coerce the child with the threat of criminal prosecution. He told you he was scared and specifically asked you if he needed a lawyer. You advised him not to get one.'

Trumann stared in disbelief. 'You wired the kid,' he said.

'Why not? No crime. You're the FBI, remember. You boys run more wire than the phone company.'

McThune leaned forward. 'Look, Ms Love, we—'

'It's Reggie.'

'OK, OK. Reggie, uh, look, we're sorry. We, uh, got a little carried away and, well, we apologise.'

'A little carried away? I could have your jobs for this.'

She was probably right. Trumann made a noisy show of standing and pacing to the end of the table. 'This is incredible. The kid didn't tell us he had a lawyer. If he'd told us, then we would have backed off. Why'd you deliberately pick this fight? It's senseless.'

'What do you want from the kid?'

'The truth. He's lying about what he saw yesterday. We know he talked to Jerome Clifford before Clifford killed himself. Maybe I don't blame him for lying. He's just a kid and he's scared. But, damn it, we need to talk to him, know what he heard.'

'I'll think about it. Let's meet in my office at three o'clock.' She took her briefcase and placed the recorder in it. 'I'll keep the tape to myself. It'll be our little secret, OK?'

McThune nodded his agreement but knew there was more.

'If I need something from you boys, like a straight answer, I expect to get it. If I catch you lying again, I'll use the tape.'

'That's blackmail,' said Trumann.

'That's exactly what it is. Indict me.' She stood.

McThune said, 'Listen, Reggie, there's this guy who'll probably want to be at the meeting. His name is Roy Foltrigg.'

'Mr Foltrigg is in town? Well, I'm honoured. Please invite him.'

By noon US Attorney Roy Foltrigg had become a nuisance to his counterpart in Memphis, George Ord, who had met Foltrigg before and did not care for him.

After McThune and Trumann returned from the hospital and broke the news about Mark's new lawyer, Foltrigg, along with Boxx and Fink, had situated himself in Ord's office to analyse the latest.

'What do you know about this lawyer?' he asked Ord.

'Never heard of her.'

'Surely someone in your office has dealt with her?' Foltrigg asked. The question was nothing short of a challenge. Ord left his office and consulted an assistant. The search began.

A secretary brought sandwiches, and lunch was eaten amid aimless speculation and chatter. The fact that Mark Sway had obtained the services of an attorney was most troublesome.

David Sharpinski, one of Ord's assistants, presented himself and explained he'd gone to law school with Reggie Love. 'We finished together four years ago,' Sharpinski said.

'What kind of work does she do?' Foltrigg asked.

'A little criminal stuff,' Sharpinski replied. 'Most of her work is with abused children. She's had a pretty rough time of it.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Well, in her first life she was the wife of a prominent doctor. After fifteen years of marriage he became involved with a young nurse. Reggie's name back then was Regina Cardoni. She took it hard, filed for divorce and things got nasty. Dr Cardoni played hardball and she slowly cracked up. He had a truckload of lawyers and they pulled strings and had her committed to an institution for two years. Then he cleaned her out. He got custody of their two children.'

Sharpinski was obviously uncomfortable telling all this to Foltrigg. But most of it was public record.

'So how'd she become a lawyer?' Foltrigg asked.

'It wasn't easy. She lived with her mother and slowly pieced her life back together. She pulled out of it.'

'How often do you see her?'

'Once or twice a month. We talk on the phone occasionally.'

'Why don't you call her now? Ask her what's going on—just friendly small talk, you know? See if she mentions Mark Sway.'

Sharpinski gave Foltrigg a look that would sour butter. 'Because she's not stupid, Mr Foltrigg. In fact, she's quite smart and if I call

she'll immediately know the reason why. Anything else?

'No. You can go now,' Ord suddenly said. 'Thanks, David.'

Sharpinski left the office just as a secretary entered with a two-page fax to Foltrigg. He read it with Boxx. 'It's from my office,' Foltrigg explained to Ord. 'Ever hear of Willis Upchurch?'

'Yes. He's a big-shot defence lawyer from Chicago—lot of mob work. What's he done?'

'He just finished a press conference in New Orleans. He said that he's been hired by Muldanno, that the case will be postponed, that his client will be found not guilty, et cetera, et cetera.'

'That sounds like Willis Upchurch. I can't believe you haven't heard of him. Your case just became a nightmare.'

THE ROOM WAS DARK because the blinds were closed. Dianne was curled along the end of Ricky's bed, napping. After a morning of getting everyone's hopes aroused, he had drifted away again. His knees were pulled to his chest and his thumb was in his mouth.

Mark sat on the cot with his back against the wall and stared at his brother and his mother. Events were whirling round his overworked brain and he was exhausted. What was the next move? Could Reggie be trusted? When should he stop lying and tell Dianne and Dr Greenway? If he told them everything, would it help Ricky?

The digital clock next to the bed gave the time as 2.32. It was impossible to believe that all this had happened in less than twenty-four hours. He scratched his knees and made the decision to tell Greenway everything Ricky could have seen or heard. He would come clean and do all he could to help Ricky. The things Romey told him were not heard by anyone else, and he would keep them private for a while.

But not for long. This was not a game played by kids in the woods. Romey stuck a real gun in his mouth. These were real FBI agents. He had hired a real lawyer who'd stuck a real tape recorder to his stomach to outfox the FBI. The man who killed the senator was a professional killer, according to Romey, and a member of the Mafia, and they would think nothing of rubbing out an eleven-year-old kid.

This was just too much for him to handle alone. He'd tell the FBI every detail Romey had unloaded on him. Then they would protect him. Maybe they would send in bodyguards. Maybe.

Then he remembered a movie about a guy who squealed on the Mafia and thought the FBI would protect him, but suddenly he was on the run with bullets flying over his head. The FBI wouldn't return his phone calls. In the final scene, the guy's car was blown to



bits and as he took his final breath a dark figure stood over him and said, 'The mob never forgets.' It wasn't much of a movie, but its message was suddenly clear to Mark.

FOLTRIGG, MCTHUNE, and Trumann arrived in the reception area of the office of Reggie Love, attorney at law, at exactly 3pm. Clint led them to a conference room lined with shelves of heavy law books. He explained that Reggie would be right with them. Foltrigg sat at one end of the table with an agent close to each side. They waited.

Reggie entered forty-five minutes later. 'Keep your seats,' she said, and offered a hand to Foltrigg, who was half standing. 'Reggie Love. You must be Roy Foltrigg.'

'I am. Nice to meet you.'

'Please be seated.' She smiled at McThune and Trumann, and for a brief second all three of them thought about the tape. 'Sorry I'm late,' she said as she sat alone at her end of the conference table. They were eight feet away, huddled together like wet ducks.

'No problem,' Foltrigg said, as if it was very much a problem. 'Where's your client?' he asked.

'At the hospital. The doctor wants him to stay near his brother.'

'We need to talk to him, Ms Love.'

'It's Reggie. OK, Roy?'

'Whatever. We think Mark was in the car with Jerome Clifford prior to his death, and we believe Clifford wanted to tell someone where his client, Mr Muldanno, had disposed of the body of Senator Boyette. There's a chance he talked to your client.'

'Let's slow down and take it one step at a time. Now, convince me Mark Sway was in the car with Clifford prior to the shooting.'

Foltrigg looked at a notepad and reeled off the many places where fingerprints had been matched: rear lights, boot, front passenger door handle, dashboard, gun. Reggie took notes. She knew Mark had been in the car but she had no idea he'd left such a wide trail.

'What else do you have?' she asked.

'Hand her the note,' Foltrigg instructed Trumann, who produced it from a file folder and handed it to her. She read it slowly.

'No prints on this?' she asked, waving the note.

'None. We've checked it thoroughly.'

She calmly placed it next to her legal pad and folded her hands together. 'Well, Roy, I think the big question is, How did you guys obtain his fingerprints to match with the ones in the car?'

'Simple. We lifted one off a soft-drink can at the hospital last night.'

'Did you ask either Mark Sway or his mother before doing so?'

'No.'

'So you invaded the privacy of an eleven-year-old child.'

'No. We are trying to obtain evidence.'

'Evidence? Evidence for what? Not for a crime, I dare say. What crime do we have here? Suicide? Watching a suicide?'

'Did he watch the suicide?'

'I can't tell you what he did or saw because our talks are privileged. You know that, Roy. What else do you have?'

Foltrigg flipped pages back and forth. 'You've seen the puffy left eye and the bump on his forehead. The police said there was a trace of blood on his lip when they found him at the scene. Clifford's autopsy revealed a spot of blood on the back of his right hand, and it's not his type.'

'Let me guess. It's Mark's.'

'Probably so. Same blood type.'

'How do you know his blood type?'

Foltrigg dropped the legal pad and rubbed his face. She was good. It was difficult to believe she'd been practising for only four years.

'From his brother's hospital admission records.'

'And how did you obtain the hospital records?'

'We have ways.'

Trumann and McThune braced themselves for a reprimand. But Reggie kept her cool. She slowly extended a finger and pointed it at Roy. 'If you get near my client again and attempt to obtain anything from him without my permission, I'll sue you and the FBI. I'll file an ethics complaint with the state bar in Louisiana, and I'll haul you into juvenile court here and ask the judge to lock you up.'

Everyone in the room knew that she would do exactly that.

Foltrigg smiled and nodded. 'Fine. Sorry if we've gotten a bit out of line. But we're anxious and we must talk to your client.'

She studied her legal pad. 'Let's meet again tomorrow. Ten o'clock. I need time to digest this and talk with my client.'

'Will Mark Sway be here?' Foltrigg asked, slamming shut his briefcase and pushing away from the table.

'I don't know.'

They stood and filed out of the room.

MARK AND HIS MOTHER stood before the window at the end of the hall and watched the rush-hour traffic. Dianne nervously lit a Virginia Slim and blew a heavy cloud of smoke. 'Who is this lawyer?'

'Her name is Reggie Love.'

'Lawyers don't work for free, Mark. We can't afford a lawyer.'

'I've already paid her,' he said like a tycoon. 'I gave her a dollar this morning, as a retainer.'

'She's working for a dollar? She must be a great lawyer.'

'She's pretty good. I've been impressed so far. She met with some FBI agents and ripped them up pretty good. She's coming here around six. You'll really like her, Mom.'

Dianne filled her lungs with smoke and exhaled. 'But why do we need her, Mark? You've done nothing wrong.'

'Well, I did lie to the cops at first, and that scares me. And I was afraid we might get in trouble because we didn't stop the man from shooting himself. It's all pretty scary, Mom.'

She watched him intently as he explained this, and he avoided her eyes. There was a long pause. 'Have you told me everything?' She asked this very slowly, as if she knew.

'Well, you know how this has affected Ricky. I think it shocked me sort of like that. Not as bad, but I'm remembering things now that I should have remembered last night.'

Dianne was suddenly concerned. 'What have you remembered?' she asked cautiously.

He took a deep breath. 'Well, I remember—'

Greenway cleared his throat and appeared from nowhere. 'I need to be going,' he said. 'I'll check back in a couple of hours.'

Mark decided to get it over with. 'Look, Doctor, I was just telling Mom that I'm remembering things about the suicide now for the first time. All day long I've been seeing flashes and recalling details. I think some of it might be important.'

'Let's go back to the room and talk,' Greenway said.

They walked to the room, closed the door behind them and listened as Mark tried to fill in the gaps. It was a relief to unload this baggage, though he did most of the talking in the direction of the floor. It was an act—this painful pulling of scenes from a shocked and badly scarred mind—and he carried it off with finesse. The only details he kept to himself were Clifford's confessions. He paused quite often, long pauses in which he searched for words to describe what was already firmly etched in his memory. At times he thought they were about to yell at him for lying last night but he ploughed ahead, obviously disturbed and deep in thought.

When he finished, Dianne sighed. Greenway stroked his beard. 'Is this all of it, Mark?'

'I don't know. It's all I can remember right now,' he mumbled.

There was a long pause. 'Frankly, Mark, I find it hard to believe you couldn't remember some of this last night,' Greenway said.

'Gimme a break, would you? Look at Ricky here. He saw what happened to me and it drove him to the ozone.'

Dianne managed a slight grin at Mark. This sudden surge of clear memory did not fool her. She would deal with him later.

REGGIE ARRIVED with a bag of sandwiches. She smiled warmly at Dianne as they shook hands, then sat beside her on the bed. She was an immediate friend of the family, anxious and properly concerned about everything. What about her job? The children's school? Money?

Dianne was tired and vulnerable, and it was nice for her to talk to a woman. Mark left the room to get drinks and when he returned the women were deep in conversation about McThune and Trumann trying to interrogate Mark. Reggie was telling the story in such a manner that Dianne had no choice but to mistrust the FBI. Dianne was alive and animated for the first time in many hours.

JACK NANCE AND ASSOCIATES was a quiet firm that advertised itself as security specialists but was in fact nothing more than a couple of private investigators. Jack Nance was an ex-con with an impressive record who'd managed to avoid trouble for ten years. His associate, Cal Sisson, was also a convicted felon. Together they scratched out a nice living doing dirty work for rich people. They were known as two very nasty and efficient men who would achieve amazing results.

Jack Nance was in his cluttered office after dark when someone knocked on the door. The secretary had left for the day. Cal Sisson was stalking a crack dealer who'd hooked the son of a client. Nance was about forty, not a big man, but compact and very agile. He went to open the door. The face was a strange one.

'Looking for Jack Nance,' the man said.

'That's me.'

'My name's Paul Gronke. Can I come in?'

Nance opened the door wider and motioned for Gronke to enter. 'It's late,' Nance said. 'What do you want?'

'I need some fast work.'

Nance studied Gronke, a burly man in his late thirties. 'I get a two-thousand-dollar retainer up-front, nonrefundable, all in cash.' Gronke pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off twenty big ones. Nance relaxed. 'I'm listening,' he said.

Gronke took a folded newspaper clipping from his jacket and handed it to Nance. 'Did you see this in today's paper?'

Nance looked at it. 'Yeah. I read it. How are you involved?'

'I'm from New Orleans. Mr Muldanno is an old pal, and he's very

disturbed to see his name suddenly show up here in the Memphis paper. Lemme tell you what's worrying him. He has a good source telling him these two boys know something.'

'Where do I fit in?'

'We need someone with Memphis connections. We need to see the kid, Mark Sway. We want you to find him and watch him. He's staying at the hospital, we think, with his mother and younger brother. Ninth floor at St Peter's. Room nine forty-three.'

'Easy enough.'

'Maybe not. There are cops and FBI agents watching.'

'I get a hundred bucks an hour—cash.'

'I know that.'

BARRY THE BLADE BOUNCED down the steps of his apartment and opened the door onto Dumaine. He looked right and left, certain that someone was watching, and took off round the corner, moving in shadows. He zigzagged for eight blocks, then disappeared into Randy's Oysters on Decatur. If they stuck to him, they were supermen.

Randy's was an old-fashioned New Orleans eatery—dark and crowded, a sanctuary. He ran up the cramped staircase to the first floor and entered a private room. A solitary figure sat at a table in near darkness, reading by the light of a candle. The man saw him and waved at a chair. Barry obediently took a seat.

Johnny Sulari was the brother of Barry's mother, and the undisputed head of the family. He owned Randy's, along with a hundred other assorted ventures. He was working tonight and did not appreciate the interruption. 'What is it?' he asked.

Barry leaned forward, aware that he was not wanted here at this moment. 'Just talked to Gronke in Memphis. Kid's hired a lawyer and is refusing to talk to the FBI. We need to make a move.'

'What? You want to hit the kid?'

'Maybe. We'll see. We need to find out what he knows, OK? If he knows too much, then maybe we'll take him out.'

'You're a complete fool, you know that, Barry? Send Bono and Pirini, but no more stupid moves. I don't want anything done up there until I say so. Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Leave now.' Johnny waved his hand and Barry jumped to his feet.

FOLTRIGG HAD BEEN a mediocre student of the law and had managed to avoid the drudgery of legal research for the past fifteen years. But here he was in George Ord's library with Boxx and Fink,





his nose stuck in a thick law book, with a dozen more stacked round him. At issue was the question of how Mark Sway could be made to divulge information if he didn't want to. For issue number two Foltrigg wanted to know if Reggie Love could be made to divulge whatever Mark Sway had told her. A half-dozen assistant US attorneys were doing identical research in New Orleans.

Trumann and McThune, following Foltrigg's orders, had begun the process of obtaining approval to offer Mark Sway safety under the Federal Witness Protection Program. They had made a dozen phone calls to Washington, twice speaking with the director of the FBI, F. Denton Voyles. It should be an easy deal. They would offer the kid's mother a good job in a new city. The family would live in a house, not a trailer. There would be a cash incentive, maybe a new car.

MARK WAS SICK of this hospital. Karen was not at the nurses' station, and the hallways were empty. A solitary man occupied the waiting area. He was on the sofa, which happened to be the spot where Mark had planned to sleep. Mark stuck two quarters in a soft-drink machine and pulled out a Sprite. He sat in a chair and stared at the *M\*A\*S\*H* rerun on the TV. The man was about forty and looked tired and worried.

'What's the matter?' Mark couldn't help but ask.

'It's my son. He's in real bad shape. Car wreck.'

'Where is he?'

'ICU, first floor. I had to leave and get away. It's a zoo down there—people screaming and crying all the time.'

'I'm very sorry. I sure hope your kid pulls through.'

Jack Nance looked at his watch and stood. 'Me too. I need to go check on him. Good luck to you . . . uh . . . what's your name?'

'Mark Sway.'

'Good luck, Mark.' He walked to the elevators and disappeared.

Mark took his place on the couch and within minutes was asleep.



The photos on the front page of Wednesday's *Memphis Press* had been lifted from an old yearbook at Willow Road Elementary School. The cute smiling faces of Mark and Ricky were on the bottom third of the page. To the left was a story about Jerome Clifford's suicide and the bizarre aftermath in which the boys were involved. It made Mark look like a cold-blooded killer.

Karen had brought the paper to him as he watched cartoons in an empty room across the hall from Ricky's. An hour earlier Ricky had opened his eyes. Now he was mumbling about nightmares and eating ice cream. Karen left and Mark read it slowly, then walked to the window. It was dawn, raining outside, and downtown Memphis was slowly coming to life. But Mark felt completely alone.

It was not fair for a kid to read about himself on the front page and not have the protection of a father and the sole affection of a mother. He needed a shield against the cops and FBI agents and reporters—and the mob. How could he get out of this mess?

Mark entered the hall and stopped at the nurses' station. 'I'm going to get a doughnut,' he said to Karen. 'You want one?'

'No, thanks.'

He walked to the elevators and pushed the call button. The middle door opened and he stepped in.

At that precise second, Jack Nance turned in the darkness of the waiting room and whispered into his radio.

It was just a few minutes past six, a good half-hour before the rush hit. The elevator stopped at floor number eight and a man stepped in. He wore a white lab jacket, jeans and sneakers.

The door closed, and suddenly the man grabbed Mark and pinned him in a corner. The elevator was moving. The man fell to one knee and pulled something from a pocket. His face was inches from Mark's, and it was a horrible face. 'Listen to me, Mark Sway,' he growled. Something clicked in his right hand, and a long, shiny switchblade entered the picture. 'I don't know what Jerome Clifford told you, but if you repeat a word of it to anyone, I'll kill you. And I'll kill your mother and little Ricky. Do you understand me?'

Mark nodded. A lump the size of a golf ball clogged his dry throat and suddenly his eyes were wet. He nodded yes, yes, yes.

'And if you tell anyone about me, I'll get you. Understand?' Mark kept nodding, only faster now.

The elevator stopped on the fifth floor and the man moved to the door, sliding the knife into a pocket. Two nurses stepped in and stood between Mark and the man with the knife. In an instant Mark's assailant was gone.

'Are you OK?' A nurse was staring down at him, frowning and very concerned. 'You look pale,' she said.

'I'm OK,' he mumbled weakly.

The elevator door opened on the second floor. Mark darted out into a narrow corridor, dodging trolleys and wheelchairs. His shoes squeaked on the linoleum as he ran to a door with an exit sign over it.

He pushed through the door and was in a stairwell. He started up, two steps at a time, and never slowed until the stairwell stopped on the fifteenth floor. There he collapsed on a landing.

CLINT AND REGGIE began each morning with a quiet cup of coffee while they planned the day. Unless she was expected in court, Reggie seldom made it to the office before 9am. She was a slow starter who usually hit her stride at about four in the afternoon.

Her mission as a lawyer was to protect abused and neglected children, and she did this with great skill and passion. The juvenile courts routinely called her for work representing indigent kids who needed lawyers but didn't know it. She was a zealous advocate for small clients who could not say thanks. She had sued fathers for molesting daughters. She had sued mothers for abusing babies. She had investigated parents for exposing children to drugs. She served as legal guardian for more than twenty children. And she worked in the juvenile court as appointed counsel for kids in trouble with the law. The money was adequate, but not important to her. She had had money once, lots of it, and it had brought nothing but misery.

On Wednesday, as Clint and Reggie sipped the first cup of the day, the buzzer rang as the door opened. Clint found Mark Sway standing in the reception room, wet from the drizzle and out of breath.

'Good morning, Mark. You're all wet.'

'I need to see Reggie,' Mark said. His hair stuck to his forehead and water dripped from his nose. He was in a daze.

'Sure.' Clint backed away from him and returned with a towel from the rest room. He wiped Mark's face and said, 'Follow me.'

Reggie was in her office. 'What's the matter, Mark?' she asked.

His eyes were red and tired. He stared at the flowers on the coffee table. 'When do we meet with the FBI?' he asked.

'In an hour. Why?'

'I'm not sure I want to talk to them.'

'OK. You don't have to, you know. I've explained all this.'

'I know.' He was mumbling softly, at times barely audible. 'But what would happen to me if I never told anyone what I know?'

She'd thought about this for hours and still had no answer. But she'd met Foltrigg and was convinced he would try all legal means to extract the information from her client.

'I'm not sure. It's very rare, but I believe steps can be taken in court to force you to testify about what you know.'

'And if I refused to talk?'

'Good question, Mark. It's a grey area. If an adult refuses a court

order, he's in contempt of court and runs the risk of being locked up. I don't know what they'd do with a child.'

'Say they drag me into court, and the judge tells me to spill my guts, and I tell the story but leave out the most important part. And they think I'm lying. What then?'

'Mark, if you lie in court, you could be in big trouble.'

He thought about this for a second, and said, 'If I tell the truth, I'm in bigger trouble.'

'Why? What's happened?'

Without a word he covered his eyes with his fists. His chin dropped to his chest and he started crying.

THE DOOR OPENED into the reception area, and a Federal Express lady ran in with a package from Print Research, an outfit that did nothing but scan newspapers and catalogue the stories. The news was clipped, copied, computerised and available within twenty-four hours. Reggie needed quick background on Boyette and the others, and Clint had placed the order the previous day. Now he removed the contents of the box—a neat stack of copies of newspaper stories.

Senator Boyette was an old Democrat from New Orleans, who'd served several undistinguished terms in the US House of Representatives before becoming a member of the world's most exclusive club. With time, he proved himself quite capable. And he mellowed. He changed from a hell-raising segregationist to a liberal statesman and an environmentalist. He railed against the oil and gas industry and made enemies in the tall buildings in New Orleans.

Then someone floated a proposal to build a toxic-waste dump in Lafourche Parish, southwest of New Orleans. Money changed hands and rumours were rampant that the New Orleans mob was behind the dump. Of course, millions were at stake.

Senator Boyette came crashing in with an army of federal regulators. He held press conferences. He made speeches all over southern Louisiana. The advocates of the waste site ran for cover.

On the night of his disappearance he had attended an angry meeting of local citizens at a high school in Houma. He left late, and alone, for the hour's drive to his home near New Orleans. By noon the next day it was determined that the senator was missing. Days went by. No body was found. The story was becoming old when, suddenly, Roy Foltrigg announced the indictment of Barry Muldanno for the murder of Senator Boyd Boyette. Big news, but no body. This, however, did not throttle Mr Foltrigg. He ranted against organised crime and predicted certain victory.



Muldanno proclaimed his innocence. It was a vendetta, he said. The New Orleans paper ran an analysis of the politicians waiting anxiously to run for Boyette's Senate seat. Foltrigg was one of two Republicans rumoured to be interested.

MARK SAT NEXT TO REGGIE and wiped his eyes. He hated himself for crying but it could not be helped. Her arm was round his shoulder and she patted him gently.

There was a knock at the door and Clint appeared, holding a stack of papers. 'Sorry to interrupt, but Mr Foltrigg will be here in a minute.' He placed the papers on the table in front of her. 'You wanted to see these before the meeting.'

'Tell Mr Foltrigg we have nothing to discuss,' Reggie said.

Clint frowned at her. 'You're not going to see him?'

'No. Tell him the meeting's been cancelled because we have nothing to say,' she said, and nodded at Mark.

'Sure,' Clint said with a smile, as if he suddenly enjoyed the idea of telling Foltrigg to take a hike. He closed the door behind him.

'What're you gonna do?' Mark asked.

'Make a few calls. I'll talk to the administrator of the hospital and arrange security round Ricky's room. I'll explain that there have been some threats. It's routine in criminal cases.'

'Do you think Mom and Ricky are safe?'

'Of course. These men are professionals, Mark. They won't do anything stupid. They may be bluffing.' She did not sound sincere.

'No, they're not bluffing. I saw the knife, Reggie. They're here in Memphis for one reason, and that's to scare the hell out of me. And it's working. I ain't talking.'

FOLTRIGG YELLED ONLY ONCE, then stormed from Reggie's office, making threats. McThune and Trumann were frustrated, but also embarrassed at his antics. As they left, McThune rolled his eyes at Clint as if he wanted to apologise for this pompous loudmouth.

Within minutes Clint took a call from George Ord and buzzed Reggie on the intercom. She allowed Ord to hold for one full minute, then picked up the phone. 'Hello.'

'Ms Love, this is—'

'It's Reggie, OK? Just Reggie. And you're George, right?'

'Right, Reggie. Roy Foltrigg is in my office and—'

'What a coincidence. He just left mine.'

'Yeah, and that's why I'm calling. He didn't get a chance to talk to you and your client.'

'Give him my apologies. My client has nothing to say to him nor any desire to meet with him.'

'Well, this will not be the end of it, you know.'

'Fine. You tell Roy and his boys that if anyone attempts to contact my client or his family, I'll have their butts.'

'I'll relay the message.'

IT WAS REALLY SORT of funny, but Ord could not laugh. He returned the receiver to its place, smiled to himself and said, 'She says the kid ain't talking, and if you or anyone else contacts the kid or his family, she'll, uh, have your butts, as she put it.'

Foltrigg bit his lip and nodded at every word, as if this was fine because he could play hardball with the best of them. He paced round the office as if in deep thought. McThune and Trumann stood by the door like sentries. Bored sentries.

'I want the kid followed, OK?' Foltrigg finally snapped at McThune. 'I want to know what he does, and more importantly, he needs to be protected from Muldanno and his henchmen.'

'OK,' McThune said. 'We'll get it done.'

'Paul Gronke's already here somewhere,' Foltrigg said, as though he'd just heard fresh gossip. They knew the flight number and his time of arrival, eleven hours ago. They had, however, managed to lose his trail once he left the airport. At this very moment no fewer than eight FBI agents were trying to find Gronke in Memphis.

'We'll find him,' McThune said. 'And we'll watch the kid.'

Foltrigg stopped pacing in front of Ord's desk. 'We're leaving for New Orleans, George. Sorry for the intrusion. I'll probably be back in a couple of days.'

What wonderful news, Ord thought. He stood, and they shook hands. 'Any time,' he said. 'If we can help, just call.'

AFTER AN HOUR of sipping hot cocoa and listening to his lawyer practise law, Mark was ready for a move. Reggie had called Dianne and explained that Mark was in her office, helping with the paperwork. Ricky was much better, sleeping again. He'd consumed half a gallon of ice cream while Greenway asked him a hundred questions.

Mark parked himself at Clint's desk. Reggie had another client in her office and they needed to plot strategy for an hour. Clint typed away on long paper and grabbed the phone every five minutes.

'How'd you become a secretary?' Mark asked, very bored with this candid view of the practice of law.

Clint turned and smiled at him. 'It was an accident. I flunked out of

law school, and Reggie gave me a job. It's a long story. She'll probably tell you about it when you meet Momma Love.'

'Momma who?'

'Momma Love. Reggie's mother. They live together, and she loves to cook for the kids Reggie represents. She fixes inside-out ravioli and spinach lasagne and all sorts of delicious Italian food.'

After two days of doughnuts the mention of thick, cheesy dishes cooked at someone's home was terribly inviting.

The phone rang. It was a judge, and Clint got real nice and chatted with him for five minutes. He hung up and returned to his typing.

Mark was curious about how much Clint knew. 'You probably know everything, don't you? I mean, after all, you type it up.'

'I know most of what goes on, sure. But Reggie doesn't tell me everything. For example, I have no idea what you've told her. I assume it's pretty serious, but she'll keep the details to herself.'

This was exactly what Mark wanted to hear. 'Do you know Robert Hackstraw? They call him Hack.'

'He's a lawyer, isn't he?'

'Yeah. He represented my mother in her divorce a couple of years ago. A real moron. He treated us like dirt.'

'Did it go to trial?'

'Yeah. My ex-father thought he should get one kid, so he hired a lawyer and for two days my mother and my father trashed each other in court. The judge hated both lawyers and said he wasn't about to separate me and Ricky. I asked him if I could testify, and he decided he wanted to hear what I had to say.'

'How'd it go?'

'I was pretty good, really. I just told about the beatings, the bruises, the stitches. And that Ricky was terrified of our father. He wanted some visitation rights. The judge not only cut off all visitation but also told him to stay away from us.'

'Have you seen him since?'

'No.'

Clint was amazed by Mark's story, he could tell. He was proud of it, in a way—proud of defending his family.

Then he remembered the knife attack in the elevator and thought of his mother at the hospital, all alone. He was suddenly scared again.

THE LIGHT RAIN HAD stopped, and clouds of mist boiled and hissed behind each passing car along Third Street. Reggie and her client turned onto Madison. Her briefcase was in her left hand, and with her right she guided him through the lunchtime crowd.

From a white Ford van parked almost directly in front of the Sterick Building, Jack Nance watched and radioed ahead. Within minutes Cal Sisson, his partner, had them, and was watching as they headed for the hospital.

Nance locked the van and jaywalked across Third. He entered the Sterick Building, took the elevator to the second floor, and gently turned the knob of the door with REGGIE LOVE—LAWYER on it. It was unlocked. He opened the door and stepped inside. A hideous buzzer went off above his head and announced his arrival.

A young man appeared from the back. 'Yes. Can I help you?'

'Yeah,' Nance said. 'I'm with the *Times-Picayune*—you know, the paper in New Orleans. Looking for Reggie Love.'

Clint stopped ten feet away. 'She's not here.'

'When might she return?'

'Don't know. You have any identification?'

Nance was headed for the door. 'No, pal. I don't carry business cards. I'm a reporter.'

'Fine. What's your name?'

'Arnie Carpentier. Tell her I'll catch her later.' He opened the door and was gone. Not a productive visit, but he'd seen the front room and reception area. The next visit would take longer.

THE RIDE TO THE hospital's ninth floor was uneventful. Reggie held Mark's hand, which normally would have irritated him but was rather comforting under the circumstances.

They spilled into the lobby on the ninth floor and had taken no more than ten steps before three people rushed at them from the waiting area. One had a microphone, one a notepad and one a camera. The one with the notepad said, 'Ms Love, is it true your client is refusing to cooperate with the FBI and the police?'

'No comment,' she said, walking faster.

They followed like bloodhounds. 'Is it true the US attorney from New Orleans was in your office this morning?'

'No comment.'

'Did your client talk to Jerome Clifford before he died?'

She squeezed Mark's hand. 'No comment.'

As they neared the end of the hall a security guard stepped forward and raised his hands at the yelping dogs.

As Reggie and Mark rounded a bend in the hall, one called out, 'Is it true your client knows where Boyette is buried?'

There was a slight hesitation in her step. The shoulders jumped and the back arched; then she and her client were gone.

Two overweight security guards in uniform sat in folding chairs by Ricky's door. One had a newspaper, which he promptly lowered as they approached. 'Can I help you?' he asked Reggie.

'Yes. I'm the attorney for the family, and this is Mark Sway, the patient's brother. Dr Greenway is expecting us,' she said. She walked to the door and knocked.

Greenway opened the door and stepped outside, followed by Dianne. She hugged Mark and placed her arm on his shoulder.

'He's asleep,' Greenway said quietly. 'I'm gonna grab a quick sandwich, and I'll be back to see Ricky and Mark in twenty minutes.'

Reggie glanced at her watch. 'I'll be back around four. There are reporters here, and I want you to ignore them.'

'Yeah, just say no comment,' Mark added helpfully.

'What do they want?' Dianne asked.

'The rumours are rampant, and they smell a story. They'll do anything to get information. It's best if you stay here with Mark.'

'OK,' Dianne said.

'I'll see you at four,' Reggie said to Dianne and Mark. 'Remember, not a word to anyone. And stay close to this room.'

MARK AND RICKY SAT on the end of the foldaway bed and looked up at Dr Greenway. Ricky wore a pair of Mark's hand-me-down pyjamas, with a blanket draped over his shoulders. He sat close to his big brother, who was bored with this little chat before it started.

Greenway leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. 'Now, Ricky, I would like to talk about the other day when you and Mark went to the woods for a smoke. OK?'

This frightened Ricky. How did Greenway know they were smoking? Mark leaned over an inch or two and said, 'It's OK, Ricky. I've already told them about it. Mom's not mad at us.'

'Do you remember going for a smoke?' Greenway asked.

Slowly he nodded his head. 'I think so. Uh-huh.'

'OK. Do you remember seeing the big black car when it pulled up in the grass?'

Ricky suddenly started shaking. The mention of the cigarette had scared him, but the image of the black car was simply too much. He bent over at the waist and began sobbing, but with no tears.

Mark rubbed his hair and repeated, 'It's OK, Ricky. It's OK. We need to talk about it.'

Greenway had warned Dianne that this first little session would not be productive. But it was very important. 'Ricky, listen to me,' he said. 'Ricky, it's OK. I just want to talk to you. OK, Ricky?'



But Ricky had had enough therapy for one day. He began to curl under the blanket, and Mark knew that the thumb could not be far behind. Greenway stood, carefully lifted Ricky and placed him in the bed.



Roy Foltrigg walked importantly up the steps of the Federal Building with his entourage behind. He entered the offices of the US Attorney for the Southern District of Louisiana, where forty-seven assistant US attorneys laboured under his command. In the main library, six assistants were waiting for him round a thirty-foot oak conference table covered with open law books and legal pads. He said hello and took a chair at the centre of the table. Thomas Fink sat nearby.

‘What do you have, Bobby?’ Foltrigg asked. Bobby was the dean of the assistants—a thirty-two-year veteran. In a crisis, when answers were needed for complex questions, they all turned to him.

‘Well, there are two avenues,’ Bobby said. ‘Neither very attractive. First, I suggest the juvenile-court approach in Memphis. Under the Tennessee Youth Code, a petition can be filed with the juvenile court classifying the child as either a delinquent or in need of supervision. A hearing is held, and the juvenile-court judge makes a determination as to what happens to the child.’

‘Who can file the petition?’ Foltrigg asked.

‘Well, the statute says it can be filed by any interested party. But—here’s the sticky part—we must allege the kid has violated the law. And the only violation even remotely touching this kid’s behaviour is obstruction of justice. So we must allege things we’re not sure of, such as the kid’s knowledge of where the body is.’

‘The kid knows where the body is,’ Foltrigg said flatly. ‘It’s my gut feeling.’

Bobby continued. ‘A summons is served on the child’s mother and a hearing is held. The child has a right to testify if he so chooses. Frankly, this is the quickest way to get the kid to talk.’

‘What if he refuses to talk on the witness stand?’

‘Very good question,’ Bobby said. ‘It is completely discretionary with the judge. If we put on a good case and convince the judge the kid knows something, he has the authority to order the kid to talk. Then if the kid refuses, he may be in contempt of court.’

‘Let’s say he’s in contempt. What happens then?’

‘Difficult to say. The judge could, as a last resort, incarcerate the

child in a youth-court facility until he purges himself of contempt.'

'In other words, until the kid talks. But it won't go that far,' Foltrigg predicted calmly. 'I think if we drag his little butt into court, he'll be so scared he'll tell what he knows. What about you, Thomas?'

'Yeah, I think it'll work.'

Foltrigg turned to the group. 'I like the sound of this. It will be a wake-up call to the kid and his lawyer. They'll know we're serious.'

Bobby cleared his throat. 'There is one other approach—and I don't like it, but it's worth mentioning. Assuming the kid knows and assuming he has confided in his lawyer, there is the possibility of a federal indictment against her for obstruction of justice. I don't have to tell you the difficulty in piercing the attorney-client privilege; it's virtually impossible. The indictment would be used to sort of scare her into cutting some deal. But it's a real long shot.'

'I like it,' said Foltrigg. 'That's plan B, OK, on hold for right now. Plan A is to file a petition in juvenile court first thing tomorrow morning.' He turned to Fink. 'Thomas, you'll handle this.'

Papers shuffled round the table. Fink took notes as Foltrigg spewed forth instructions. 'Talk to the judge. Ask him for an expedited hearing. Explain how much pressure is behind this. I'll be sitting by the phone in case I'm needed.' Roy stood and smiled round the room. 'Good work, men. I appreciate it.'

ON THE FOURTH FLOOR of the Radisson Hotel in downtown Memphis, Paul Gronke played a monotonous game of gin rummy with Mack Bono, a Muldanno foot soldier from New Orleans. Gronke was a childhood friend of Muldanno's, a trusted partner in many of his dealings. But he was bored sitting in this hotel room, waiting for the next move by an eleven-year-old kid.

An open door led to the next room, where a radio and a cellular phone stood ready on a table. Jack Nance had spent most of the afternoon there, with his bugging devices. The client, this clown called the Blade, had approved the wiring of the telephones in both the doctor's and lawyer's offices, plus a bug in room 943.

As far as Nance was concerned, it was simply a surveillance job and the client was paying top dollar in cash. But he had heard the whispers in the room next door. These guys were deadly.

The cellular phone rang. It was Cal Sisson, calling from the hospital. The lawyer had arrived. She was in room 943 with Mark Sway. Nance replaced the phone on the table and walked into the other room.

'That was Cal. Kid's still at the hospital—now with his lawyer.'

'Any sign of the Feds?' Gronke grunted.

'Yeah. Same two are hanging around the hospital. Doing the same thing we are, I guess. The hospital's keeping two security guards by the door and another one close by.'

'You think the kid told them about meeting me this morning?' Gronke asked for the hundredth time that day.

'He told someone. Why else would they suddenly surround his room with security guards?'

'Yeah.'

Despite his arrogance and street-punk posture, Gronke seemed to be a man of patience. Cold-blooded and patient. Nance figured it went with the territory.

THEY LEFT THE HOSPITAL in her Mazda RX-7—Mark's first ride in a sports car. The car was not new but it was cool, with a gear lever that she worked like a veteran racecar driver. They darted through traffic as they left downtown and headed east. It was almost dark.

Ricky had been awake when they left, staring at cartoons but saying little. A sad little tray of hospital food sat on the table, untouched by either Ricky or Dianne. Mark felt guilty for leaving but was delighted to be headed, he hoped, for a plate of hot, heavy food with warm bread. Clint had mentioned inside-out ravioli and spinach lasagne, and for some reason visions of these rich, meaty dishes had stuck in his mind. Maybe there would be some cookies, too.

He thought of these things as Reggie thought of being trailed. Her eyes went from the traffic to the mirror and back again. She drove much too fast, zipping between cars and changing lanes, which didn't bother Mark one bit. The tyres squealed as she suddenly turned right at an intersection. Mark chuckled, and she laughed as though it was all fun, but her stomach was flipping.

They turned again, into a narrower street of old homes with deep lawns and manicured hedgerows. She slowed and turned into a driveway lined with thick hedges. The Mazda stopped beside a large two-storey house with a porch round the front of it. Shrubs and flowers grew to the windows. Ivy covered one end of the porch.

'Is this your house?' Mark asked, almost in awe.

'My parents bought it before I was born. This is where I grew up. My daddy died, but Momma Love is still here. She's almost eighty.' She pointed to a garage behind the house. 'You see those three windows above the garage? That's where I live.'

They entered the house through a side door, and the aroma from the kitchen hit Mark hard. He was suddenly starving. A small woman

with dark eyes and grey hair in a tight ponytail met them, and hugged Reggie.

'Momma Love, meet Mark Sway,' Reggie said.

Momma Love gently hugged him. 'Nice to meet you, Mark,' she said. She led him to the kitchen table. 'Have a seat right here, and I'll get you something to drink.'

The kitchen was small and cluttered, with cabinets and shelves along three walls. Steam rose from the gas stove. A wooden table with four chairs sat squarely in the centre of the room, with pots and pans hanging from a beam above it.

Mark took the nearest chair and watched Momma Love scoot around, grabbing a glass from the cabinet, opening the refrigerator, pouring iced tea from a pitcher as she and Reggie chatted. Reggie was stirring something in a pot on the stove.

'Are you hungry?' Momma Love asked.

'Yes, ma'am.'

Reggie winked at him. 'Mark's been eating hospital food for three days, Momma Love, so he wants to know what you're cooking.'

'It's a surprise,' she said, opening the oven and releasing a thick aroma of meat and cheese and tomatoes. 'But I think you'll like it.'

Momma Love was suddenly hacking away with a large knife on a cutting board. She whirled round and laid a basket of bread, hot and buttery, in front of him. Mark grabbed the biggest slice and took a bite. It was soft and warm, unlike any bread he'd eaten. The butter and garlic melted instantly on his tongue.

Momma Love was setting the table. 'Go wash your hands, Mark, right down the hall there.' Mark crammed the last bite of bread into his mouth and went into the bathroom.

When he returned, Reggie was seated at the table, flipping through a stack of mail. Momma Love opened the oven and pulled out a deep dish covered with aluminium foil. 'It's lasagne,' Reggie said to him with a trace of anticipation.

Momma Love dug out great steaming hunks with a large spoon. 'The recipe has been in my family for centuries,' she said. 'It has four layers, each with a different cheese.' She filled their plates. The four different cheeses ran together and oozed from the thick pasta.

The phone on the countertop rang, and Reggie answered. 'Go on and eat, Mark,' Momma Love said as she set his plate in front of him. She nodded at Reggie's back. 'She might talk for ever.'

Mark cut a huge bite with his fork, blew on it just enough to knock off the steam, and carefully raised it to his mouth. He chewed slowly, savouring the rich meat sauce and cheeses.

'It's great,' he said. This pleased Momma Love.

Reggie hung up and turned to the table. 'Gotta run downtown. The cops just picked up Ross Scott for shoplifting again.'

'How long will you be gone?' Mark asked, his fork still.

'Couple of hours. You finish eating, and visit with Momma Love. I'll take you to the hospital later.' She patted his shoulder and then she was out the door.

HE FINISHED THE PEACH COBBLER and ice cream and thanked her again. He said it was delicious for the tenth time, and stood up with an aching stomach. Momma Love sent him to the den while she cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher.

He noticed a large family portrait above the sofa and walked closer. It was an old photograph of the Love family, with Mr and Mrs Love on a small sofa and two boys in tight collars standing beside them. Reggie was between her parents, in the centre of the portrait. She was ten or eleven, about Mark's age, and the face of this pretty little girl caught his attention and took his breath.

'Beautiful children, huh?' It was Momma Love, easing beside him and admiring her family. 'We were all so young and happy then.'

'Where are the boys?'

'Joey, on the right there, was a test pilot for the air force, and was killed in nineteen sixty-four in a plane crash. He's a hero.'

'I'm very sorry,' Mark whispered.

'Bennie, on the left, is a marine biologist in Vancouver. He's never married. Reggie's got the only grandkids.' She reached for a frame on an end table. She handed it to Mark—two graduation photos with blue caps and gowns. The girl was pretty. The boy had mangy hair, a teenager's beard and a look of sheer hatred in his eyes.

'These are Reggie's kids,' Momma Love explained, without the slightest trace of either love or pride. 'Jeff was in prison last time we heard anything. Selling dope. Amanda is out in California trying to be an actress. Reggie lost her when she was about thirteen. They were going through this nightmare of a divorce, and Joe, her ex-husband, got the kids and ruined them. He was a doctor and never had time for them. Awful, just awful.' She paused and rubbed her eyes, then took his arm. 'Come with me. Let's go sit on the porch.'

He followed through a narrow foyer, through the front door, and they sat in the swing on the front porch. It was dark and the air was cool. The chains above them squeaked as the swing moved slowly back and forth. Momma Love was humming now, and Mark was suddenly sleepy.



REGGIE FOUND THEM on the dark porch, in the swing, rocking quietly. Mark was curled in a ball, his head resting in Momma Love's lap. 'How long has he been asleep?' she whispered.

'An hour or so. He's a sweet child.'

'He sure is. I'll call his mother and see if he can stay here tonight.'

'I'll fix him a good breakfast in the morning.'

FOLTRIGG'S CONFERENCE TABLE was once again covered with law books and legal pads. Wally Boxx had shed his tie and jacket. Empty coffee cups littered the room. Both men were tired.

The law was quite simple: every citizen owes to society the duty of giving testimony to aid in the enforcement of the law. And a witness is not excused from testifying because of his fear of reprisal. There were no exceptions, no loopholes for scared little boys.

Trumann walked through the door and said, 'You guys are working late.'

'We're finishing up,' Foltrigg said, pointing at a chair. 'Have a seat.' He stretched, then cracked his knuckles.

'I've got an idea,' Trumann said, sitting across the table. 'Just before I left the office this afternoon, I talked to K.O. Lewis, Voyles' number one deputy. He's in St Louis attending a conference, and he asked about the Boyette case and Jerome Clifford and the kid. I told him what we knew. He said feel free to call if he could do anything. Said Mr Voyles wants daily reports.'

'I know all this.'

'Right. Well, I was just thinking. St Louis is an hour's flight from Memphis. What if Mr Lewis presents himself to the juvenile-court judge in Memphis first thing in the morning and explains that the kid is in danger and it's in his best interests for us to take him into custody? You know, for his own protection.'

'I like this,' Foltrigg said softly. Wally liked it too.

'The kid'll crack under the pressure. First he's taken into custody, and that'll scare him. Hopefully, the judge orders the kid to talk. If he doesn't, he's in contempt, maybe.'

'Yeah, but we can't predict what the judge will do.'

'Right. So Mr Lewis tells him about Gronke and his mob connections and that he's in Memphis to harm the kid. Either way, we get the kid in custody, away from his lawyer.'

Foltrigg was wired now. 'Get K.O. on the phone.'

Trumann began punching numbers.

While Trumann talked to K.O. Lewis, Foltrigg and Wally whispered in the corner. 'It's a great idea,' Wally said. 'I'm sure this

juvenile-court judge is just some local yokel who'll listen to K.O. and do whatever he wants.'

Trumann nodded at them, gave the OK sign with a big smile, and hung up. 'He'll do it,' he said proudly. 'He'll catch an early flight to Memphis and meet with Fink. Then they'll get together with Ord and descend on the judge. They'll have the kid talking in no time.'

Foltrigg flashed a wicked smile. 'It just might work.'

IN ONE CORNER of the small den above the garage, Reggie flipped through a thick book under a lamp. It was midnight but she couldn't sleep, so she curled under a quilt and sipped tea while reading a law book Clint had found, entitled *Reluctant Witnesses*. The law was quite clear: every witness has a duty to come forward and assist those authorities investigating a crime. A witness cannot refuse to testify on the grounds that he or she feels threatened.

At some point in the near future Mark would be ordered to talk. And this was why she couldn't sleep. To advise him to disclose the location of the senator's body would be to jeopardise him. His mother and brother would be at risk. These were not people who could become instantly mobile. Ricky might be hospitalised for weeks. Dianne would be a sitting duck if Muldanno were so inclined.

It would be proper and ethical and moral to advise him to cooperate, and that would be the easy way out. But what if he got hurt? What if something happened to Ricky or Dianne?

The best advice to Mark would be simply to lie. At the critical moment, just explain how the late Jerome Clifford said nothing about Boyd Boyette. Who in the world could ever know the difference?



After breakfast, Reggie and Mark left the house and headed for the hospital. It was seven thirty, much too early for Reggie, but Dianne was waiting. Ricky was doing much better.

'What do you think will happen today?' Mark asked.

For some reason this struck Reggie as being funny. 'You poor child,' she said, chuckling. 'You've been through a lot this week.'

'Yeah. I don't much like school, but it'd be nice to go back. Last night I dreamed everything was normal, and I made it through a whole day with nothing happening to me. It was wonderful.'

'Well, Mark, I'm afraid I have some bad news. Clint called a few minutes ago. You've made the front page again. According to the

Memphis *Press*, the cops believe Mr Clifford told you everything before he killed himself, and now you're refusing to cooperate.'

'Pretty accurate, wouldn't you say?'

She glanced at the rearview mirror. 'Yeah. It's spooky.'

'How do they know this stuff?'

'The cops talk to reporters—off the record, of course.'

'Do you think those reporters'll be waiting at the hospital?'

'Probably. I told Clint to find a back entrance somewhere and to meet us in the parking lot.'

'I'm really sick of this. My buddies are in school and I'm running around town with my lawyer, hiding from reporters, dodging killers with switchblades. I don't know if I can take any more.'

She watched him between glances at the street and traffic. His jaws were tight. He stared straight ahead, but saw nothing.

'I'm sorry, Mark. This could be a very long day.'

WHEN THEY ARRIVED, Clint had been hustling round the hospital for thirty minutes with no success. He was sweating and apologising as they met at the parking lot.

'Just follow me,' Mark said, and darted through the emergency door. They moved through heavy rush-hour hall traffic and found an ancient escalator going down.

'I hope you know where you're going,' Reggie said, obviously in doubt and half jogging in an effort to keep up with him. Clint was sweating even harder.

'No problem,' Mark said, and opened a door.

'We're in the kitchen, Mark,' Reggie said, looking around.

'Just be cool. Act like you're supposed to be here.'

He punched a button by a service elevator, and the door opened instantly. He punched another button on the inside panel and they lurched upwards. 'There are eighteen floors here, and this elevator stops at number ten. It will not stop at nine.' He looked at the numbers above the door and explained this like a bored tour guide.

The door opened on ten and they stepped into a huge closet with rows of shelves filled with towels and sheets. Mark opened a heavy metal door and suddenly they were in the hallway. He pointed to his left and they were off, past patients' rooms, to an emergency-exit door. He pushed it open and then they bounded down the steps to the ninth floor, opened another door and they were in a quiet hallway. He pointed again and they were off; they turned a corner and found themselves by the nurses' station, where they glanced down another hall and saw the loiterers by the public elevators.

Dianne was sitting in a folding chair in the hall, with a Memphis cop kneeling before her. She was crying. Mark saw the cop and the tears and ran for his mother. She grabbed him and they hugged.

'What's the matter, Mom?' he asked, and she cried harder.

'Mark, your trailer burned last night,' the cop said sadly as he stood. 'Everything's gone.'

Mark glared at him in disbelief, then squeezed his mother round the neck. She was wiping tears, trying to compose herself.

'What started the fire?' Reggie asked the cop.

'Don't know right now. The fire inspector will be on the scene this morning. Could be electrical.'

'I'm Reggie Love, attorney for the family. I need to talk to the fire inspector, OK?' She handed him a card. 'Please ask him to call me.'

'Sure, lady.' The cop looked down at Dianne and said, 'Ms Sway, I'm very sorry about this.'

'Thank you,' she said. He nodded at Reggie and Clint and left.

Dianne suddenly realised she had an audience. She stood and stopped crying, even managed a smile at Reggie.

'This is Clint Van Hooser. He works for me,' Reggie said.

Dianne smiled at Clint. 'I'm very sorry,' Clint said.

'Thank you,' Dianne said softly. She finished wiping her face. Her arm was round Mark, who was still dazed.

'Does Ricky know about the fire?' Mark asked.

'No. And we're not telling him, OK?'

'OK, Mom. Could we go inside and talk, just me and you?'

Dianne smiled at Reggie and Clint and led Mark into the room. The door was closed, and the tiny Sway family was all alone with all its worldly possessions.

THE HONOURABLE HARRY ROOSEVELT had presided over the Shelby County Juvenile Court for twenty-two years. He was the first black juvenile-court judge in Tennessee, and when he'd been appointed by the governor, in the early seventies, his future was brilliant and there were glowing predictions of higher courts for him to conquer.

The higher courts were still there, with their marbled corridors and elegant courtrooms, and Harry Roosevelt was still here, in a deteriorating building with few janitors and more cases per judge than any other docket in the world. His court was the unwanted stepchild of the judicial system. Most lawyers shunned it. Harry had turned down four appointments, all to courts where the heating systems worked in the winter. He had been considered for these appointments because

he was smart and black, and he turned them down because he was poor and black. He was paid sixty thousand a year, so he lived in a nice home. But he'd known hunger as a child, and those memories were vivid. He would always think of himself as a poor black kid.

That was the reason Harry Roosevelt remained a juvenile-court judge. To him it was the most important job in the world. He enforced his own orders for the support and education of children born out of wedlock. He terminated parental rights and placed abused children in new homes. He carried heavy burdens.

Harry Roosevelt was a legend in Memphis. He weighed more than twenty stone and, in his black robes, was an imposing figure on the bench, glaring down over his reading glasses at deadbeat fathers who refused to support their children. If you messed with Harry's kids, as they were known, you could find yourself handcuffed and standing before him with a bailiff on each side.

At eight thirty his secretary informed Harry that there was a group of men waiting outside who desperately needed to speak with him.

'Oh, really. Who are they?'

'One is George Ord, our distinguished US attorney. There's also an assistant US attorney from New Orleans, a Mr Thomas Fink. And a Mr K.O. Lewis, deputy director of the FBI. And an FBI agent.'

Harry looked up from a file and thought about this. 'A rather distinguished group. Show them in.'

She left, and seconds later Ord, Fink, Lewis and McThune filed into the cluttered office and introduced themselves. Everyone took a seat, then Harry looked at his watch and said, 'Gentlemen, I am scheduled to hear seventeen cases today. What can I do for you?'

Ord cleared his throat first. 'Well, Judge, I'm sure you've seen the stories in the papers about a boy by the name of Mark Sway.'

'Very intriguing.'

'Mr Fink here is prosecuting the man accused of killing Senator Boyette, and the case is scheduled for trial in a few weeks.'

'I'm aware of this. I've read the stories.'

'We are almost certain that Mark knows more than he is telling. He's lied to the Memphis police on several occasions. We think he talked with Jerome Clifford before the suicide. We've tried to talk to the kid but he's hired a lawyer—and she's stonewalling.'

'Reggie Love is a regular in my court. A very competent attorney. Sometimes a bit overprotective of her clients, but there's nothing wrong with that.'

'Yes, sir. We're very suspicious of the boy and we feel quite strongly that he knows the location of the senator's body.'



Harry gave Ord one of his patented scowls. 'So you want me to bring the kid in and ask him questions?'

'Sort of. Mr Fink has brought with him a petition alleging the child to be a delinquent.'

This did not sit well with Harry. His forehead was suddenly wrinkled. 'What type of offence has the child committed?'

'Obstruction of justice. It's our position that, through his misrepresentations, Mark Sway has obstructed the investigation into the murder of Senator Boyette.'

'What if the kid knows nothing?'

'We can't be certain until we ask him.'

'It just seems a bit severe to allege the kid is a delinquent without any proof.'

Ord leaned forward and spoke solemnly. 'Look, Judge, if we can take the kid into custody, then have an expedited hearing, we think this matter will be resolved. If he states under oath that he knows nothing about Boyd Boyette, then the petition is dismissed and the matter is over. But if he knows something relevant to the location of the body, we think he will tell us during the hearing.'

Harry picked up his daily calendar. As usual it was filled with more misery than he could handle in a day. 'These allegations of obstruction are rather shaky, in my opinion. But I can't prevent you from filing the petition. I suggest we hear this matter during lunch today. Where is the kid now?'

'At the hospital,' Ord said. 'Last night he stayed with his lawyer.'

'That sounds like Reggie,' Harry said with affection. 'I see no need to take him into custody.'

'Your Honour, if I may,' K.O. said. 'We think custody is urgent.'

'Oh, you do? I'm listening.'

McThune handed Judge Roosevelt a glossy eight-by-ten. Lewis handled the narration. 'The man in the picture is Paul Gronke, a close associate of Barry Muldanno. He's been in Memphis since Tuesday night.' McThune produced two smaller photos. 'The guy with the dark shades is Mack Bono, a convicted murderer with strong mob ties in New Orleans. The guy in the suit is Gary Pirini, another Mafia thug who works for the Sulari family. Bono and Pirini arrived in Memphis yesterday.' He paused for dramatic effect. 'The kid's in serious danger, Your Honour. About four hours ago, the Sway family's trailer burned to the ground. The fire looks suspicious.'

'Our laws certainly provide for the child to be taken into custody after the petition is filed,' Harry said. 'But what happens to the kid if he tells you what you want to hear? He's a marked little boy at that

point, don't you think? If these guys are as dangerous as you say, then our little pal could be in serious trouble.'

'We're making preliminary arrangements to place the family in the Witness Protection Program.'

'Let me see your petition.'

Fink whipped it out and handed it to him. The judge studied it, then handed it back. 'I don't like this, but I'll sign the order. I want the kid taken directly to the juvenile wing and placed in a room by himself. I'll personally call his lawyer later in the morning.'

They stood in unison and thanked him. He pointed to the door, and they left quickly without handshakes or farewells.

THE BLINDS WERE DRAWN; the television was off. Ricky was awake but staring blankly at the ceiling without saying a word. Mark and Dianne sat together on the foldaway bed and whispered about such things as clothing and toys and dishes—and insurance.

The shock of the news had worn off, and Mark started thinking about the man with the knife. His intent had been to silence Mark Sway for ever. What if the fire was just another reminder from the man with the switchblade? The thought was so horrible it seared itself into his mind. He became convinced the fire was intentional.

There was a knock on the door but it did not open. They waited; then another knock. Mark opened the door slightly and saw two new faces peering through the crack. 'Yes?' he said, expecting trouble because the nurses and security guards allowed no one to get this far. He opened the door a bit wider and walked into the hall.

'Looking for Dianne Sway,' said the nearest face.

'Who are you?' Mark asked as Dianne came out of the room. The security guards and nurses were standing to one side. Mark locked eyes with Karen and knew instantly something was terribly wrong.

'Detective Nassar, Memphis PD. This is Detective Klickman.'

Dianne stood behind her son. 'I am Dianne Sway,' she said quickly.

Nassar pulled papers from his coat pocket and handed them over Mark's head to his mother. 'These are from juvenile court, Ms Sway. It's a summons for a hearing at noon today.'

Her hands shook wildly and the papers rattled as she tried hopelessly to make sense of this.

Nassar tried to smile. 'Ms Sway, the summons requires us to take Mark Sway into custody at this time.'

'What!' Dianne yelled at Nassar. 'You can't take my son!'

Mark tried to calm her. 'Mom, don't yell. Ricky can hear you.'

'Over my dead body!' she yelled at Nassar, just inches away.

'Look, Ms Sway, I understand how you feel. But I have my orders. Nothing's gonna happen to Mark. We'll take care of him.'

'What's he done? Just tell me, what's he done?'

'If you'll read these papers, Ms Sway, you'll see that a petition has been filed in juvenile court alleging Mark to be a delinquent because he won't cooperate with the police and FBI. And Judge Roosevelt wants to have a hearing at noon today. That's all.'

'That's all! You jerk! You show up here to take away my son and you say, "That's all"!'

Nassar stopped trying to smile and pulled at the corners of his moustache. There was a long pause. Dianne kept both hands on Mark's shoulders. Finally Detective Klickman said his first words. 'Look, Ms Sway, we have no choice. We have to take your son.'

'It's OK, Mom. I'll go. Call Reggie and tell her to meet me at the jail. She'll probably sue these clowns and have them fired.'

The cops grinned at each other. Cute kid.

Nassar then made the mistake of reaching for Mark's arm. Dianne lunged and slapped him on his left cheek, screaming, 'Don't touch him! Don't touch him!'

Nassar grabbed his face and Klickman instantly seized her arm. She wanted to strike again but was suddenly spun round—and somehow, in the midst of this, her feet and Mark's feet became tangled and they hit the floor.

Klickman pulled Mark up from the fracas. The nurses rushed forward, and the security guards joined in as Dianne got to her feet.

The door opened, and Ricky stood there holding a stuffed rabbit. He stared at his mother, who was struggling with a security guard. His face was as white as the sheets. Then he started the low, mournful groan that only Mark had heard before.

Dianne yanked free and picked Ricky up. The nurses followed her into the room and they tucked him into the bed. They patted his arms and legs, but the groaning continued. Then the thumb went into his mouth and he closed his eyes.

'Let's go, kid,' Klickman said.

'You gonna handcuff me?'

'No. This is not an arrest.'

'Then what the hell is it?'

'Watch your mouth, kid,' Nassar warned.

Klickman bent over and put his hands on his knees. He stared Mark directly in the eyes. 'Are you going with us, or shall we drag you out of here?'

Mark snorted and glared at him. 'You think I'm scared of you,



don't you? Let me tell you something, meathead. I've got a lawyer who'll have me out in ten minutes. My lawyer is so good that by this afternoon you'll be looking for another job.'

'I'm scared to death. Now let's go.'

They started walking, a cop on each side of the defendant.

'Where are we going?'

'Juvenile detention centre.'

They passed a small crowd of orderlies and nurses, and suddenly Mark was the centre of attention. He swaggered a bit. They turned the corner and then he remembered the reporters.

And they remembered him. A flash went off as they got to the elevators, and two of the loiterers with pencils and pads were suddenly standing next to Klickman.

'Hey, Mark, where you going?' one of them asked. There was another flash.

'To jail,' he said loudly without turning round.

'Are you under arrest, Mark?' another yelled.

'No,' Klickman snapped just as the door opened. Nassar shoved Mark inside while Klickman blocked the door until it started to close.

They were alone in the elevator. 'That was a stupid thing to say, kid. Really stupid.' Klickman was shaking his head.

'Is it against the law to talk to the press?'

'Just keep your mouth shut, OK?'

The elevator stopped, opened, and a small crowd boarded. Klickman stayed close to Mark. When all was quiet and they were moving again, Mark said loudly, 'My lawyer'll sue you jerks, you know that, don't you? You'll be unemployed this time tomorrow.'

'Just shut up, Mark,' Klickman said.

'And what if I don't? You gonna rough me up like you did my mother? Throw me down, kick me a few times?'

Neat rows of sweat broke out across Klickman's forehead.

'Is your mother all right?' a nurse asked, looking concerned.

'She'd be a lot better, of course, if these cops would leave her alone. They're taking me to jail, you know that?'

'This is awful. What for?'

'I don't know. They won't tell me.'

Nassar groaned softly. Klickman closed his eyes.

HE INSISTED ON RIDING in the rear seat like a real criminal. Nassar and Klickman in the front seat rode in complete silence, hoping he might do the same. They were not so lucky.

'You forgot to read me my rights,' he said.



No response from the front seat.

'Hey, you clowns, do you know *how* to read me my rights?'

Klickman's breathing was laboured, but he was determined to ignore him. Nassar stopped at a red light, looked both ways, then gunned the engine, driving as fast as possible.

Mark saw a crowded parking lot next to a tall building. Patrol cars were parked in rows. Nassar turned in and parked.

They rushed him inside. Cops were everywhere. They stopped at a desk where Nassar signed some papers. Mark studied the surroundings. Klickman almost felt sorry for him. He looked so small.

They were off again. The elevator took them to the fourth floor, and again they stopped at a desk. A uniformed lady, with a plastic tag declaring her to be Doreen, looked at a clipboard. 'Says here Judge Roosevelt wants Mark Sway in a private room,' she said.

'I don't care where you put him,' Nassar said. 'Just take him.'

She pointed at a piece of paper and Nassar scribbled his name. 'He's all yours.' He and Klickman left without another word.

'Empty your pockets, Mark,' the lady said as she handed him a large metal container. He pulled out a dollar bill, some change and a pack of gum. She counted the money and wrote something on a card, which she then inserted on the end of the metal box.

'Is this the jail?' Mark asked, cutting his eyes in all directions.

'We call it a detention centre,' she said.

'What's the difference?'

This seemed to irritate her. 'Listen, Mark, you'll get along much better here if you keep your mouth shut.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, and his eyes watered. It suddenly hit him. He was about to be locked in a room far away from his mother, far away from Reggie.

'Follow me,' Doreen said, keys rattling from her waist. She opened a heavy wooden door and started through a hallway with grey metal doors spaced evenly on both sides. She stopped at number 16 and unlocked it. 'In here,' she said.

Mark walked in slowly. The room was about twelve foot wide and twenty foot long, with bunk beds and a lavatory. Doreen patted the top bunk. 'You can have either bed,' she said.

He sat down on the bottom bunk. 'Can I call my mother?'

'Not yet. You can make a few calls in about an hour.' She was rattling her keys. 'Listen, I have to go now. The door locks automatically when it's closed, and if it opens without my little key here, then an alarm goes off. So don't get any ideas, Mark.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Doreen closed the door behind her. There was a click, then silence.

He stared at the doorknob for a long time. This didn't seem like jail. There were no bars on the windows. The beds and floor were clean. The breezeblock walls were painted a pleasant shade of yellow. He'd seen worse, in the movies.

There was so much to worry about: Ricky groaning like that again, the fire, his mother slowly unravelling, cops and reporters glued to him. He stretched on the top bunk and studied the ceiling. Where in the world was Reggie?

## 10

Gronke stood at the window of his hotel room and listened as Jack Nance reported the disturbing news.

'Happened less than thirty minutes ago,' Nance said.

'Why?' Gronke grunted.

'Has to be youth court. They can't just pick a kid and take him to jail. They had to file something in youth court. Cal's there now checking it out. But youth-court records are locked up, I think.'

'Get the records, OK?'

Nance seethed but bit his tongue. He hated Gronke and his little band of cutthroats. 'We're trying,' he said.

'Try harder,' Gronke said. 'Now I gotta tell Barry the kid's been taken away and locked up.' He glared at Nance. 'Barry'll wanna know if there's a way to get to the kid. What would you suggest?'

'I suggest you leave the kid alone. This is not New Orleans, and this is not just some little punk you can rub out and make everything wonderful. People are watching him. If you do something stupid, you'll have a hundred Fibbies all over you.'

'Yeah, yeah.' Gronke waved both hands at him in disgust. 'I want you boys to keep watching him. If they take him to court, I wanna know it. Figure it out, Nance. This is your city.'

'Yes, sir,' Nance said loudly, then left the room.

FOR TWO HOURS every Thursday morning, Reggie disappeared into the office of Dr Elliot Levin, her psychiatrist for ten years. Their sessions were never disturbed.

Clint paced nervously in Levin's reception area. Dianne had read the summons and petition to him over the phone. He had called Judge Roosevelt and the detention centre, and now he waited impatiently for eleven o'clock. The receptionist tried to ignore him.

REGGIE WAS SMILING when she pecked Dr Levin on the cheek and they walked into his plush reception area, where Clint was waiting. She stopped smiling. 'What's the matter?' she asked.

'We need to go,' Clint said, ushering her outside to the parking lot. 'They've picked up Mark Sway. He's in custody.'

'What! Who?'

'Cops. A petition was filed this morning alleging Mark to be a delinquent, and Roosevelt ordered him into custody.' Clint was pointing. 'Let's take your car. I'll drive.'

'Who filed the petition?'

'Foltrigg. Dianne called from the hospital—that's where they got him. I've assured her you'll go get Mark.'

They opened and slammed doors to Reggie's car, and sped off. 'Roosevelt's scheduled a hearing for noon,' Clint explained.

'Noon! You must be kidding. That's fifty-six minutes from now.'

'It's an expedited hearing. I talked to him about an hour ago and he wouldn't comment on the petition. Where are we going?'

She thought about this for a second. 'Let's go to juvenile court. I want to see the petition, and I want to see Harry Roosevelt. This is absurd—a hearing within hours of filing the petition.'

'But isn't there a provision for expedited hearings?'

'Yeah. But only in extreme matters. Delinquent! What's the kid done? This is crazy. He doesn't deserve to be taken in.'

'Well, they got him.'

JASON MCTHUNE HAD to hit the lever three times before the antique urinal flushed. He thanked heaven he worked in the Federal Building, where everything was polished and spiffy. He'd lay asphalt with a shovel before he'd work in juvenile court. But he was here now, like it or not, wasting time on the Boyette case because K.O. Lewis wanted him here. And K.O. took orders from Mr F. Denton Voyles, director of the FBI. Mr Voyles was quite upset—not about the killing itself, but about the FBI's inability to solve it completely.

As McThune opened the rest-room door and stepped into the hallway he was suddenly face to face with Reggie Love. Clint was a step behind her. She saw McThune immediately, and within seconds he was backed against the wall, afraid to move.

'Morning, Reggie,' he said, forcing a calm smile.

'Who's here with you?' she asked, glaring.

This was not a secret. He could discuss this with her. 'George Ord, Thomas Fink from New Orleans, K.O. Lewis.'

'Who's K.O. Lewis?'

'Deputy director, FBI. From Washington, DC.'

'What's he doing here?'

'Well, I, uh . . .'

'Don't make me mention the tape, McThune,' she said, mentioning it anyway. 'Just tell me the truth.'

McThune shrugged as if he'd forgotten about the tape. 'I think Foltrigg's office asked Mr Lewis to come down. That's all.'

'That's all? Did you guys have a little meeting with Judge Roosevelt this morning?'

'Yes, we did.'

'Didn't bother to call me, did you?'

'Uh, the judge said he'd call you.'

'I see. Are you planning to testify during this little hearing?'

'I'll testify if I'm called as a witness.'

She stuck a finger in his face. The nail on the end of it was long, curved, carefully manicured and painted red. McThune watched it fearfully. 'You stick with the facts, OK. One lie, however small, or one cheap-shot remark that hurts my client, and I'll slice your throat, McThune. You understand?'

He kept smiling. 'I understand,' he said.

Reggie turned and walked away, with Clint by her side. McThune turned and darted back into the rest room.

'What was that all about?' Clint asked.

'Just keeping him honest.' They wove through crowds of litigants and their lawyers huddled in small packs along the hallway.

'What's the bit about the tape?'

'I'll play it for you later. It's hysterical.' She opened the door with JUDGE HARRY M. ROOSEVELT painted on it, and they entered a small, cramped room with four desks in the centre and rows of filing cabinets round the walls. Reggie went straight to the first desk on the left, where a pretty black secretary was typing. She stopped typing and smiled. 'Hello, Reggie,' she said.

'Hi, Marcia. Where's His Honour?'

'He's on the bench. Should be off in a few minutes. You're on for noon, you know. He tried to call you all morning.'

'Well, he didn't find me. I'll wait in his office.'

'Sure.' She handed Reggie a copy of the petition.

Reggie asked Clint to wait in the hall and watch for Mark, then entered the judge's office as if it were hers.

Few lawyers in Memphis spent as much time in Harry Roosevelt's juvenile court as Reggie Love, and over the past four years their lawyer-judge relationship had developed from one of mutual respect

to one of friendship. Harry, his wife Irene and Reggie had watched many basketball games together, sometimes joined by one or another male friend of Reggie's. The basketball was usually followed by cheesecake at Café Espresso in The Peabody or maybe a late dinner at Grisanti's in midtown. Harry was always hungry, and Reggie occasionally kidded him about his weight.

Reggie marvelled at the organised debris of his office. On the floor was an ancient pale carpet, most of it covered with neat stacks of briefs. Sagging bookshelves lined two walls, but the books could not be seen for the red and manila files tucked in front. Three old wooden chairs sat pitifully before the desk. One had files on it. One had files under it. One was vacant for the moment. Reggie sat on this one.

Despite the chaos of his office, Harry Roosevelt was the most organised judge Reggie had encountered in her four-year career. He was not forced to spend time studying the law because he'd written most of it. He was known for his economy of words, so his orders and decrees tended to be lean by judicial standards. He didn't tolerate lengthy briefs written by lawyers, and he was abrupt with those who loved to hear themselves talk. Reggie admired him immensely.

She flipped through the petition. Foltrigg and Fink were the petitioners, their signatures at the bottom. Nothing detailed, just broad, sweeping allegations about the juvenile, Mark Sway, obstructing a federal investigation by refusing to cooperate with the FBI and the US Attorney's Office.

But it could be worse. Foltrigg's name could be at the bottom of a grand-jury subpoena demanding the appearance of Mark Sway in New Orleans. That might be next if this didn't work.

The door opened and a massive black robe lumbered in, with Marcia in pursuit, holding a list and clicking off things that had to be done immediately.

'Good morning, Reggie,' Harry Roosevelt said with a smile. He patted her on the shoulder as he walked by. 'That'll be all,' he said to Marcia, who closed the door and left. He fell into his chair.

'How's Momma Love?' he asked.

'She's fine. And you?'

'Marvellous. Not surprised to see you here.'

'You didn't have to sign a custody order. I would've brought him here, Harry. You know that.'

Harry smiled and rubbed his eyes. 'Reggie, Reggie. You never believe your clients should be taken into custody. You think all's well if you can just take them home and feed them.'

'It helps.'



'Yes, it does. But according to Mr Ord and the FBI, little Mark Sway could be in a world of danger. Do you know a Mr Gronke and his pals Bono and Pirini? Ever hear of these guys?'

'No.'

'Well, it seems that these gentlemen have arrived in our fair city from New Orleans and that they're associates of Barry Muldanno, or the Blade, as I believe he's known down there. This scares me, Reggie. These men do not play games.'

'Scares me, too. He was threatened yesterday at the hospital. But I don't think the code gives you the authority to order custody of children who may be in danger.'

'Reggie, dear, I wrote the code. I can issue a custody order for any child alleged to be delinquent.'

'And according to Foltrigg and Fink, what are Mark's sins?'

Harry smiled at her again. 'He can't keep quiet, Reggie. If he knows something, he must tell them. You know that.'

'What if he refuses to talk?'

'I don't know. We'll deal with that when it happens. How smart is this kid?'

'Besides being street smart—very. I talked to his fifth-grade teacher yesterday, and he makes all As except for maths.'

'No prior trouble?'

'None. He's a great kid, Harry. Remarkable, really.'

'Most of your clients are remarkable, Reggie.'

'This one is special. He's here through no fault of his own.'

There was a brief knock at the door, and Marcia appeared. 'Your client is here, Reggie. Witness Room C.'

'Thanks.' She stood and walked to the door. 'I'll see you in a few minutes, Harry.'

'Yes. Listen to me. I'm tough on kids who don't obey me.'

'I know. My client will be fully advised.'

HE WAS SITTING in a chair leaning against the wall, a frustrated look on his face. The witness room was tiny, with no windows and bad lighting. When Reggie entered he smiled at her, obviously relieved.

'So how's jail?' she asked. 'How's Doreen?'

'They haven't fed me yet. Can we sue them?'

'Maybe.'

'Am I going back there? I'd like to know what's going on.'

'Well, it's very simple. We'll have a hearing before Judge Harry Roosevelt in a few moments, in his courtroom. The US attorney and the FBI are claiming you possess important information, and I think

we can expect them to ask the judge to make you talk.'

'Can the judge make me talk?'

'No one can make you talk. But the judge can put you back in the same little room if you don't.'

'Back in jail! I don't understand. I haven't done a thing wrong, and I'm in jail. I just don't understand this.'

'Mark, *if* Judge Roosevelt instructs you to answer certain questions, and *if* you refuse, then he can hold you in contempt of court for not answering, for disobeying him. Now, if you were an adult and you refused to answer, then you'd go to jail for contempt.'

'But I'm a kid.'

'Yes, but I don't think he'll allow you to go free if you refuse to answer the questions. You see, Mark, the law is very clear in this area. A person who has information crucial to a criminal investigation cannot withhold it because he feels threatened. In other words, you can't keep quiet because you're afraid of what might happen to you or your family. There are no exceptions, not even for kids.'

Mark thought about all this. His chair rocked methodically against the wall. 'How long would I be in jail?'

'Assuming, of course, you're sent there, probably until you decide to comply with the judge's orders. Until you talk.'

'OK. What if I decide not to talk? How long will I stay in jail? A month? A year? Ten years?'

'I can't answer that, Mark. No one knows.'

Another long pause. He'd spent three hours in Doreen's little room, and it wasn't such a bad place. But the thought of Ricky and his mother all alone and struggling without him was unbearable. 'Have you talked to my mother?' he asked.

'No, not yet. Do you want her in the courtroom with you?'

'No. She's got enough on her mind. We can handle this mess.'

She touched his knee and wanted to cry.

Someone knocked on the door and said, 'The judge is ready.'

Mark breathed deeply and stared at her hand on his knee. 'Can I just take the Fifth Amendment?'

'No. It won't work, Mark. Nothing you tell them will incriminate you in the murder of Senator Boyette. You're not a suspect in any crime. So you cannot hide under the Fifth Amendment.'

He rocked forward and set the chair on all fours. 'I need to know something, Reggie. Why can't I just tell them I know nothing? Why can't I say that me and old Romey talked about suicide and going to heaven and hell—you know, stuff like that?'

'You can't lie in court, Mark.' She said this with all the sincerity she

could muster. She wanted so badly to say, 'Yes, that's it. Lie, Mark, lie!' But she held firm. 'You'll be under oath, so you must tell the truth.'

'Then it was a mistake to hire you, wasn't it? You're making me tell the truth, and the truth might get me killed. If you weren't around, I'd march in there and lie my little butt off, and me and Mom and Ricky would all be safe.'

'You can fire me if you like. The court will appoint another lawyer.'

He stood and walked to the darkest corner of the room and began crying. Though she'd seen it many times, the sight of a child scared and suffering was unbearable. She couldn't keep from crying too.



Two deputies escorted him into the courtroom from a side door, away from the main hallway where the curious were known to lurk. Reggie followed them. Clint waited outside.

The courtroom was of a design Mark had never seen on television. There were no seats for spectators. The judge sat behind an elevated structure between two flags, with the wall just behind him. Two tables were in the centre of the room, and one was already occupied by men in dark suits. To the judge's right was a tiny table where an older woman was flipping through a stack of papers. A younger lady with a stenographic machine sat directly in front of the judge's bench. A bailiff with a gun on his hip was the final actor in the play.

Mark followed Reggie to their table and took his seat, aware that everyone was staring at him. Reggie pulled a legal pad from her briefcase and began writing notes. Mark stared at the table—eyes still wet, but determined to be tough through this ordeal.

'Bailiff, is the door locked?' the judge asked.

'Yes, sir.'

'Very well. I have reviewed the petition, and I am ready to proceed. For the record, I note the child is present along with counsel. However, the child's mother is not present in the courtroom, and this concerns me.' Harry paused and seemed to read from the file.

Fink decided this was the appropriate time to establish himself in this matter. He stood slowly and addressed the court. 'Your Honour, if I may, for the record, I'm Thomas Fink, Assistant US Attorney for the Southern District of Louisiana. I am one of the petitioners in this matter and, if I may, I would like to address the issue of the presence of the child's mother.'

Harry said nothing, just stared as if intrigued. Reggie smiled.

Fink continued. 'Your Honour, it's our position, the position of the petitioners, that this matter is of a nature so urgent that this hearing must take place immediately. The child is represented by counsel, quite competent counsel I might add, and none of the child's legal rights will be prejudiced by the absence of his mother.'

'You don't say?' Harry asked.

'Yes, sir. This is our position.'

'Your position, Mr Fink,' Harry said very slowly and very loudly with a pointed finger, 'is in that chair right there. Please sit, and listen to me very carefully, because I will say this only once.'

Fink fell into his chair, mouth open, gaping in disbelief.

Harry scowled. 'This is my little courtroom and I make the rules. Rule number one is that you speak only when you are first spoken to by me. Rule number two is that you do not grace His Honour with unsolicited speeches. His Honour does not like to hear the voices of lawyers. Rule number three is that you do not stand in my courtroom. Do you understand these rules, Mr Fink?'

Fink stared blankly at Harry and tried to nod, determined never to rise again. So much for impressing the court with his eloquence.

Mark was terrified. He had hoped for a kind, gentle old man with lots of love and sympathy. Not this. He glanced at Mr Fink, whose neck was crimson, and he almost felt sorry for him.

'Ms Love,' the judge said, suddenly warm and compassionate, 'I understand you may have an objection on behalf of the child.'

'Yes, Your Honour. We have several objections we'd like to make at this time, and I want them in the record.'

'Certainly,' Harry said.

'First, Your Honour, inadequate notice has been given to the child, his mother and his lawyer. About three hours have passed since the petition was served upon the child's mother, and I was not notified of this hearing until fifty-six minutes ago.'

'When would you like to have the hearing, Ms Love?'

'What about Tuesday or Wednesday of next week?'

'That's fine. Say Tuesday at nine. Of course, Ms Love, the child will remain in custody until then.'

'Your Honour, I cannot agree on a continuance if my client will remain in custody.'

'Very well. Let the record reflect a continuance was offered by the court and declined by the child. Please proceed, Ms Love.'

'We also object to this hearing because the child's mother is not present, Your Honour.'

‘When can Ms Sway be available?’

‘No one knows, Your Honour. She is literally confined to the hospital room with her son, who’s suffering from post-traumatic stress. It could be weeks before she’s available.’

‘So you want to postpone this hearing indefinitely?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘All right. You’ve got it. Of course, the child will remain in custody pending the hearing.’

‘The child does not belong in custody. The child will make himself available any time the court wants. There’s nothing to be gained by keeping the child locked up until a hearing.’

‘There are complicating factors in this case, Ms Love, and I’m not inclined to release the child at this time. If something happened to him, I’d carry the guilt to my grave. Please continue, Ms Love.’

‘The child moves this court to dismiss the petition filed against him, on the grounds that the allegations are without merit and the petition has been filed in an effort to explore things the child *might* know. The petition is a hopeless mishmash of maybes and what-ifs, filed under oath without the slightest hint of the real truth.’

Harry glared down at Fink and said, ‘I’m inclined to agree with her, Mr Fink. What about it?’

Fink had settled into his chair and watched with comfort as Reggie’s first two objections had been shot down by His Honour. Now the judge was agreeing with her. He bolted to the edge of his chair, almost stood but caught himself, and started stammering. ‘Well, uh, Your Honour, we, uh, can prove our allegations if given the chance. We, uh, believe what we’ve said in the petition—’

‘I certainly hope so,’ Harry sneered. ‘If I hear the proof in this case and find you’re playing games, I can hold you in contempt.’

Fink had seen his share of nasty trials and hostile judges, and rallied quite nicely. ‘Your Honour, the petition is much like an indictment. Its truth cannot be ascertained without a hearing, and if we can get on with it, we can prove our allegations.’

Harry turned to Reggie. ‘I’ll take this motion to dismiss under advisement and hear the petitioners’ proof. If it falls short, then I’ll grant the motion. Anything else, Ms Love?’

‘Not at this time.’

‘Call your first witness, Mr Fink,’ Harry said. ‘And make it brief.’

‘Yes, sir. Sergeant Milo Hardy of the Memphis police.’

Mark had not moved during these preliminary skirmishes. He wasn’t sure if Reggie had won them or lost them. There was something unfair about a system in which a little kid was brought



into court and, in the midst of a barrage of laws and motions and legal talk, was supposed to know what was happening to him.

The courtroom was silent as Sergeant Hardy was fetched. His Honour removed his reading glasses and stared at McThune and K.O. Lewis, who were seated immediately behind Fink and Ord.

‘I want this on the record,’ he said. He glared at Fink again. ‘These proceedings are confidential. This hearing is closed for a reason. Now, Mr Fink, I realise you must report to the US attorney in New Orleans, and I realise Mr Foltrigg is a petitioner and has a right to know what happens here. But no one else. And you are to tell Mr Foltrigg to keep his big mouth shut. Do you understand, Mr Fink?’

‘Yes, Your Honour.’

‘Mr McThune and Mr Lewis, you may now leave the courtroom,’ Harry said abruptly. Fink turned and stared at them, then looked at the judge.

‘Uh, Your Honour, would it be possible for these gentlemen—’

‘I told them to leave, Mr Fink,’ Harry said loudly. ‘If they’re gonna be witnesses, we’ll call them later. If they’re not witnesses, they have no business here. Now, move along, gentlemen.’

McThune was practically jogging for the door, without the slightest hint of wounded pride, but K.O. Lewis was angry. He buttoned his jacket, stared at His Honour, then strutted for the door.

Seconds later Sergeant Hardy entered and sat in the witness chair. Harry looked at Fink and waved at Hardy as if it was now permissible to get on with it. Fink almost stood again, caught himself and grabbed his legal pad. His frustration was apparent.

‘Would you state your name for the record?’ he asked in a short, rapid burst.

Harry held up his hand and Fink slumped in his seat. ‘Mr Fink, I don’t know how you folks do things in New Orleans, but here in Memphis we make our witnesses swear to tell the truth before they start testifying. Does that sound familiar?’

Fink rubbed his temples and said, ‘Yes, sir. Could the witness please be sworn?’

The elderly woman sprang to her feet and swore Hardy to tell the truth. She returned to her seat.

‘Now, Mr Fink, you may proceed,’ Harry said with a nasty little smile. He relaxed in his seat and listened intently to the rapid question-and-answer routine that followed.

In a chatty voice Hardy described the scene of the suicide, the position of the body, the condition of the car. He produced a transcript of the 911 call made by Mark. Then he explained the

capture of young Mark in the woods and their ensuing conversations and how he had been able to poke all sorts of holes in the kid's story.

After thirty minutes Harry grew restless and Fink took the hint. Reggie had no cross-examination, and when Hardy stepped down and left the room, there was no doubt that Mark Sway was a liar who'd tried to deceive the cops.

McThune was called as the next witness. Reggie reached into her briefcase and withdrew a cassette tape. She held it casually in her hand. McThune glanced at her and closed his eyes. His testimony was as dry as cornmeal. He explained the fingerprints they found all over the car and speculated about the kids and the garden hose. He showed Harry the suicide note and gave his thoughts about the words added by a different pen. He talked about the blood found on Clifford's hand, which was of the same type as Mark Sway's, who just happened to have a busted lip and a couple of other wounds.

McThune's thoughts and speculations were objectionable, but Reggie kept quiet. She'd been through many of these hearings with Harry, and she knew he would hear it all and decide what to believe. Objecting would do no good.

Fink then walked McThune through the events of Tuesday, the day after the suicide, when they tried to talk with Mark and his lawyer. McThune behaved himself and stuck to the facts. He left the room in a quick dash for the door, and he left behind the undeniable fact that young Mark was quite a liar.

From time to time during the testimony Harry watched Mark. The kid was impassive, hard to read, preoccupied with an invisible spot somewhere on the floor. Reggie glanced at her client occasionally, as if waiting for a signal, but he ignored her.

'Any more witnesses, Mr Fink?' Harry asked.

'No, sir. We do, however, Your Honour, feel that, due to the unusual circumstances of this case, the child should take the stand and testify.'

Harry ripped off the reading glasses again and leaned towards Fink. 'Have you studied the juvenile laws for this jurisdiction?'

'I have.'

'Great. Will you please tell us, sir, under which code section the petitioner has the right to force the child to testify?'

Fink dropped his head a few inches and found something on his legal pad to examine.

'This is not a kangaroo court, Mr Fink. We do not create new rules as we go. Surely you understand this?'

Fink studied the legal pad with great intensity.

'Ten-minute recess!' His Honour barked. 'Everyone out of the courtroom except Ms Love. Bailiff, take Mark to a witness room.'

Fink and Ord stumbled over each other as they clawed for the door. The court reporter and clerk followed them. The bailiff escorted Mark away and, when the door was closed, Harry unzipped his robe and threw it on a table.

'Are you going to allow the kid to testify?' he asked.

'I don't know, Harry. What do you think?'

'If you put him on,' Harry said, 'Fink'll ask him some very pointed questions about what happened in the car with Clifford.'

'I know. That's what worries me.'

'How will the kid answer the questions?'

'I honestly don't know. I've advised him fully. We've talked about it at length. And I have no idea what he'll do.'

'It's obvious, Reggie, that he knows something,' Harry said. He thought about this for a long time. This child was now his, one of Harry's kids, and each decision from now on would be based on what was best for Mark Sway.

'What are you thinking?' she asked.

'If I can assume the child knows something relevant to the investigation, then several things might happen. First, if you put him on the stand and he gives the information Fink wants, then the kid walks out of here, but he's in great danger. Second, if you put him on the stand and he refuses to answer Fink's questions, then I strongly suspect Mr Foltrigg will get a grand-jury subpoena for Mark, and away you go to New Orleans.'

Reggie nodded in agreement. 'So what do we do, Harry?'

'If the kid goes to New Orleans, I lose control of him. If I were you, I'd put him on the stand and advise him not to answer the crucial questions. At least not for now. He'll go back to our juvenile detention centre, which is probably much safer than anything in New Orleans. By doing this, you protect the child from the New Orleans thugs until the Feds can arrange something better.'

'This is so unfair to the boy. He deserves more from the system.'

'I agree. I'm open to suggestions.'

'What if I don't put him on the stand?'

'Well, based on the proof I've heard, I'll have no choice but to find him to be a delinquent and I'll send him back to Doreen.'

'He's not a delinquent.'

'Maybe not. But if he knows something and he refuses to tell, then he's obstructing justice.' There was a long pause. He leaned forward and touched her arm. 'Listen to me, dear. Our little pal is in a world

of trouble. So let's get him out of it. I say we take it one day at a time, keep him in a safe place where we call the shots, and in the meantime start talking to the Feds about their Witness Protection Program. If that falls into place for the kid and his family, then he can tell these awful secrets and be protected.'

'I'll talk to him.'

UNDER THE STERN supervision of the bailiff, the parties were reassembled and directed to their positions. Fink glanced about fearfully, uncertain whether to sit, stand, or crawl under the table.

His Honour waited until all was quiet. 'On the record,' he said in the general direction of the court reporter. 'Ms Love, I need to know if young Mark will testify.'

'Under the circumstances,' she said, 'he doesn't have much of a choice. I will allow him to testify.'

His Honour was suddenly all warmth and smiles. 'Mark, I want you to remain in your seat while I ask you some questions.'

Fink winked at Ord. Finally the kid would talk.

'Raise your right hand, Mark,' His Honour said, and Mark slowly obeyed. The hand was trembling as the elderly lady stood in front of Mark and properly swore him.

Harry reviewed his notes for a second, then smiled down at the witness. 'Now, Mark, I want you to explain to me exactly how you and your brother discovered Mr Clifford on Monday.'

'We sneaked off into the woods behind the trailer park to smoke a cigarette,' he began, and slowly led to the point where Romey stuck the water hose in the exhaust and got into the car.

'What'd you do then?' His Honour asked anxiously.

'I took it out,' he said, and told the story about his trips through the weeds to remove Romey's suicide device, and how Romey grabbed him, slapped him around and threw him in the car.

'So you were in the car with Mr Clifford before he died,' His Honour said cautiously. 'What did he do once he got you in the car?'

'He slapped me some more, yelled at me a few times, threatened me.' And Mark told all that he remembered about the gun and the whiskey bottle. He spoke as if in a trance.

'So you talked with Mr Clifford while you were in the car?'

Mark knew what was coming, as did everyone in the courtroom, so he jumped in quickly in an attempt to divert it.

'Yes, sir. He was out of his mind. He would yell at me for crying, then he would apologise for hitting me.'

There was a pause as Harry waited to see if he had finished.

‘Did Mr Clifford say anything else?’

Mark thought about this for a second and decided he hated Reggie. He could simply say no, and the ball game would be over. No, sir, Mr Clifford did not say anything else. He just rambled on like an idiot for about five minutes, then fell asleep; and I ran. If he’d never met Reggie and had not heard her lecture about being under oath and telling the truth, then he would simply say ‘No, sir’, and go home or back to the hospital or wherever.

Or would he? One day, when he was in the fourth grade, the cops put on a show about police work, and one of them demonstrated a polygraph. With cops and FBI agents swarming round him, could the polygraph be far away? He’d lied so much since Romey killed himself, and he was really tired of it.

‘Mark, I asked you if Mr Clifford said anything else.’

‘Like what?’ Mark asked, stalling.

‘Like, did he mention anything about Senator Boyd Boyette?’

‘Who?’

Harry flashed a sweet little smile; then it was gone. ‘Mark, did Mr Clifford mention anything about a case of his involving a Mr Barry Muldanno or the late Senator Boyd Boyette?’

The long pause before his response said it all. Fink’s heart was labouring. Aha! The kid *does* know!

‘I don’t think I want to answer that question,’ Mark said, staring at the floor.

Fink looked hopefully at the judge.

‘Mark, look at me,’ Harry said. ‘I want you to answer the question. Did Mr Clifford mention Barry Muldanno or Boyd Boyette?’

‘Can I take the Fifth Amendment?’

‘No. You’re not implicated in the death of Senator Boyette.’

‘Then why did you put me in jail?’

‘I’m going to send you back there if you don’t answer my questions,’ Harry said.

‘I take the Fifth Amendment anyway.’

They were glaring at each other, witness and judge, and the witness blinked first. His eyes watered and he sniffed twice. He clenched the armrests and squeezed until his knuckles were white.

Fink was near cardiac arrest. The kid knew, damn it!

‘Mark,’ the judge said, ‘you must answer my questions. If you refuse, then you’re in contempt of court. Do you understand this?’

‘Yes, sir. Reggie’s explained it to me.’

‘And did she explain that if you’re in contempt, then I can send you back to the juvenile detention centre?’



'Yes, sir.'

'Do you want to go back there?'

'Not really, but I have no place else to go.' His voice was stronger and the tears had stopped. The thought of jail was not as frightening now that he'd seen the inside of it. He could tough it out for a few days. In fact, he figured he could take the heat longer than the judge. He was certain his name would appear in the paper again in the very near future. And the reporters would undoubtedly learn he was locked up by Harry Roosevelt for not talking—a little kid who'd done nothing wrong.

Reggie had told him he could change his mind any time he got tired of jail.

'Did Mr Clifford mention the name Barry Muldanno to you?'

'Take the Fifth.'

'Did Mr Clifford mention the name Boyd Boyette to you?'

'Take the Fifth.'

'Did Mr Clifford say anything about the present location of the body of Boyd Boyette?'

'Take the Fifth.'

Harry removed his reading glasses for the tenth time and rubbed his face. 'Mark, I'm ordering you to answer these questions.'

'Yes, sir. I'm sorry,' Mark said. 'I respect you and what you're trying to do. But I cannot answer these questions because I'm afraid of what might happen to me or my family.'

'I understand, Mark, but the law does not allow private citizens to withhold information that might be crucial to a criminal investigation. You leave me no choice but to hold you in contempt. I'm ordering you to return to the juvenile detention centre. Right now we'll take it one day at a time. We'll meet again at noon tomorrow, if that's agreeable with everyone.'

Fink was crushed. 'Your Honour, I don't think I can be here tomorrow. As you know, my office is in New Orleans, and—'

'Oh, you'll be here, Mr Fink. You and Mr Foltrigg together. You chose to file your petition in my court, and now I have jurisdiction over you. And if you're not here, I'll hold you in contempt, and tomorrow it'll be you and your boss being hauled off to jail.'

Fink's mouth was open, but nothing came out. Ord spoke for the first time. 'Your Honour, Mr Foltrigg has a hearing in Louisiana in the morning. Mr Muldanno has a new lawyer who's asking for a continuance, and the judge has set the hearing for tomorrow.'

'Then tell Mr Foltrigg to fax me a copy of the judge's order. I'll excuse him. But as long as Mark is in jail for contempt, I intend to

bring him back here every other day to see if he wants to talk. I'll expect both petitioners to be here.'

The bailiff had eased his way to the wall behind Reggie and Mark, and was watching His Honour and waiting for a signal.

'Mark, I'm going to excuse you now,' Harry said, scribbling on a form. 'I'll see you again tomorrow. OK?'

Mark nodded. Reggie squeezed his arm and said, 'I'll talk to your mother, and I'll come see you in the morning.'

'Tell Mom I'm fine,' he whispered in her ear. 'I'll try and call her tonight.' He stood, and left with the bailiff.

'Send in those FBI people,' Harry said to the bailiff as he was closing the door.

'Are we excused, Your Honour?' Fink asked. He was anxious to leave this room and call Foltrigg with the horrible news.

'Relax, Mr Fink. I want to talk, off the record, with you boys and the FBI people. Just take a minute.' Harry excused the court reporter and the old woman. McThune and Lewis entered and took their seats behind the lawyers. 'It's apparent to me,' Harry said, 'that this child has some critical information and he's scared to divulge it. Perhaps we can convince him to talk if we can guarantee his safety and that of his mother and brother. I'm open to suggestions.'

K.O. Lewis was ready. 'Your Honour, we have taken preliminary steps to place him in our Witness Protection Program.'

'I've heard of it, Mr Lewis, but I'm not familiar with the details.'

'It's quite simple. We move the family to another city. We provide new identities. We find a good job for the mother and get them a nice place to live. And we stay close by.'

'Sounds tempting, Ms Love,' Harry said.

'They're not mobile right now,' she said. 'Ricky is confined to the hospital.'

'We've already located a private children's psychiatric hospital in Portland that can take him right away,' Lewis said. 'It's one of the best in the country. We'll pay for it, of course. After he's released, we'll move the family to another city.'

'What do you think, Ms Love?' Harry asked. 'Will Ms Sway go for it?'

'She's under enormous stress right now. One kid in a coma, the other in jail. It could be a hard sell.'

'Do you think she could be in court tomorrow? I'd like to talk to her.'

'I'll ask the doctor.'

'Good. This meeting is adjourned.'

Foltrigg watched the traffic on Poydras Street, New Orleans, and waited for the call from Memphis. His mind could not leave the wonderful image of Mark Sway sitting in a witness chair somewhere in Memphis, telling all his splendid secrets. Larry Trumann was on standby, waiting for the call so they could swing into action with a posse of corpse hunters.

Someone knocked lightly, and the door opened. It was Wally Boxx. 'Heard anything?' he asked, walking to the window and standing next to his boss.

'No. Not a word.'

They stood in silence and watched the street.

'What's the grand jury doing?' Roy asked.

'The usual. Routine indictments. What're you thinking?'

Foltrigg scratched his chin. His eyes had a faraway look. 'Think about this. If for some reason the kid doesn't talk, what do we do then? I say we go to the grand jury, get subpoenas for both the kid and his lawyer, and drag them down here. The kid'll be terrified.'

'Why would you subpoena his lawyer?'

'Pure harassment. We get the subpoenas today, sit on them until late tomorrow afternoon, then serve the kid and his lawyer. The subpoenas will require their presence before our grand jury at ten o'clock Monday morning. They won't have a chance to run to court and quash the subpoenas because it's the weekend and everything's shut down.'

A secretary squeaked through on the intercom and announced that Mr Fink was holding on line one. Foltrigg walked to his desk and hit the switch for the speakerphone, then fell into his chair. 'Wally's here with me, Tom. Tell us what happened.'

'Nothing much. The kid's back in jail. He wouldn't talk, so the judge found him in contempt.'

'What do you mean, he wouldn't talk?'

'He wouldn't talk. The judge handled both the direct and cross-examinations, and the kid admitted being in the car and talking with Clifford. But when the judge asked questions about Boyette and Muldanno, the kid took the Fifth Amendment.'

'The Fifth Amendment!'

'That's right. He wouldn't budge.'

'But he knows, doesn't he, Tom? The little punk knows.'

'Oh, there's no question about it. The judge has scheduled another

hearing for noon tomorrow. He wants the kid brought back in to see if he's changed his mind. I'm not too optimistic.'

'I want you at that hearing, Tom.'

'The judge wants you too, Roy. We explained you had a hearing in the morning, and he insisted that you fax him a copy of the hearing order. He said he'd excuse you under those circumstances.'

'Is he some kind of nut?'

'No, he's not a nut. He said he plans to hold these little hearings quite often next week, and he expects both of us to be there.'

'Are you coming in, Tom?' Roy asked.

'Yeah. I'll catch a flight out in a couple of hours and fly back here in the morning.' Fink's voice was now very tired.

'I'll wait for you here, Tom. Good work.'

'Yeah.'

Roy hit the phone switch. 'Get the grand jury ready,' he snapped. 'Tell the clerk that the subpoenas will be sealed until they are served late tomorrow.'

Wally headed through the door and was gone. Foltrigg returned to the window, mumbling to himself. 'I knew it. I just knew it.'

THE HALL WAS EMPTY as Doreen opened the door to return Mark to his little room. She followed him in and eased round the walls like a dope dog sniffing at the airport. 'Sort of surprised to see you back here,' she said. 'Must've upset Judge Roosevelt.'

'I guess so.'

She walked to the bunks and began patting the blanket. 'I've been reading about you and your little brother. Pretty strange case. How's he doing?'

'He's probably gonna die,' Mark said sadly. 'He's in a coma, you know, sucking his thumb and grunting. Won't eat.'

'I'm so sorry.' Her eyes were wide open and she had stopped touching everything.

'It's awful. I've been feeling dizzy myself. Who knows? I could end up like my brother.' He walked to the bottom bunk and fell into it. Doreen knelt beside him, deeply troubled now.

'Anything you want, honey. you just let me know. OK?'

'OK. Some pizza would be nice.'

She stood and thought about this for a second. He closed his eyes as if in deep pain. 'I'll see what I can do,' she said.

'I haven't had lunch, you know.'

'I'll be right back,' she said, and she left. The door clicked loudly behind her. Mark bolted to his feet and listened to it.

THE ROOM WAS DARK as usual—the lights off, the door shut, the blinds drawn. Dianne was drained from lying in bed with Ricky, hugging and cooing and trying to be strong in this damp, dark little cell.

Reggie had stopped by two hours ago. She'd explained the hearing, described Mark's room at the detention centre because she'd seen one before, told her he was safer there than here, and talked about the Witness Protection Program. At first the idea was attractive—they would simply move to a new city, with new names and a new job and a decent place to live. But the more she lay there and stared at the wall, the less she liked the idea—forever on the run, always afraid of an unexpected knock on the door, always lying about their past.

She had almost decided to veto the idea when Mark called her from the jail. He said he'd just finished a large pizza, was feeling great—nice place and all—was enjoying it more than the hospital. He chatted so eagerly that she knew he was lying. He said he was already plotting his escape. They talked about Ricky and he apologised for not being there to help. She fought tears when he tried to sound so mature. She felt like a failure because her eleven-year-old son was in jail and she couldn't get him out. She couldn't do a thing but pray that she would wake up and the nightmare would be over.

BARRY THE BLADE picked a dumpy little bar in New Orleans's French Quarter because it was quiet and dark. He found a tiny table at the back and sipped a vodka and lime while he waited.

Gronke arrived twenty minutes late and crowded his bulky frame into a chair in the corner. 'Nice place,' he said. 'How you doin'?'

'OK.' Barry snapped his fingers and the waiter walked over.

'Beer. Grolsch,' Gronke said.

'Did they follow you?' Barry asked.

'I don't think so. I've zigzagged through half the Quarter.'

'What's happening up there with the kid?' Barry asked.

'He's in jail, and he ain't talkin'. They had some kinda hearing before the youth court, then took him back to jail.'

The bartender carried a heavy tray of dirty beer mugs through the swing doors into the dirty, cramped kitchen, and when he cleared the doors, two FBI agents in jeans stopped him. One flashed a badge while the other took the tray.

'What the—?' the bartender asked, staring at the badge.

'FBI. Need a favour,' said Special Agent Skipper Scherff calmly.

'Sure. Anything.'

'What's your name?' asked Scherff.



'Uh, Dole. Link Dole.' The bartender had used so many names over the years it was difficult keeping them straight.

'OK, Link. There are two men out there having a drink in the rear corner, on the right side, where the ceiling is low.'

'Yeah, OK, sure. I'm not involved, am I?'

'No, Link. Just listen.' Scherff pulled a set of salt and pepper shakers from his pocket. 'Put these on a tray with a bottle of ketchup. Go to the table, just routine, you know, and switch these with the ones sitting there now. You understand?'

Link was nodding, but not understanding. 'Uh, what's in these?'

'Salt and pepper,' Scherff said. 'And a little bug that allows us to hear what these guys are saying. They're criminals, Link, and we have them under surveillance.'

'OK, OK. Don't tell anyone,' Link said, trembling.

'It's a deal. Now, is there an empty closet around here?'

Link thought a second or two, anxious to help. 'No. But there's a little office right above the bar.'

'Great, Link. Go exchange these, and we'll set up some equipment in the office.' Link held the salt and pepper shakers gingerly, as if they might explode, and returned to the bar.

'The little bastard knows something, doesn't he?' the Blade said.

'Of course,' Gronke replied. 'Otherwise, this wouldn't be happening. Why would he get himself a lawyer and clam up like this?'

Link approached them with a tray loaded with a dozen salt and pepper shakers and bottles of ketchup and mustard. He swapped the shakers and bottles on their table and was gone.

'This kid scares me, man,' Barry said.

'Yeah, but he ain't talkin', Barry. We got to him. We took care of the trailer. The kid is scared to death.'

'I don't know. Is there any way to get him?'

'We can't hit the kid, Barry. I mean, hell, the cops have him. He's locked up. It won't work.'

'What about his mother or his brother?'

Gronke shook his head in frustration. He was a tough thug who could threaten with the best of them, but he was not a killer.

'What about his lawyer?' Barry asked. 'What's she sayin' on the phone?' His chin was inches from the salt shaker.

'Don't know. We couldn't go into her office last night.'

The Blade was suddenly angry. 'You what?'

'Our man is doing it tonight, if all goes well.'

'Are these guys any good?'

'Nance is pretty smooth and cool under pressure. His partner,

Cal Sisson. is a loose cannon. Afraid of his shadow.'

Barry lit an unfiltered Camel. 'Are they protecting the lawyer?'

'I don't think so.'

'Where does she live? What kinda place?'

'She's got an apartment behind her mother's house.'

'She'd be easy, wouldn't she? Break in, take her out, steal a few things. Just another house burglary gone sour.'

Gronke shook his head. 'I'm not in the mood to kill anyone.'

'That's fine. I'll get Pirini to do it.'

DOREEN'S SHIFT ENDED at five, and the last thing she did was check on Mark. She'd stopped by on the hour throughout the afternoon and watched with growing concern as his condition worsened. He was withdrawing before her very eyes—saying less with each visit, just lying there in bed, staring at the ceiling. She promised to return early the next day. And she sent more pizza. Mark told her he thought he could make it until morning. Evidently, Doreen left instructions because the next floor supervisor, a plump little woman named Telda, immediately knocked on his door and introduced herself. For the next four hours Telda knocked repeatedly and entered the room, staring at him as if she feared something was about to snap.

Mark watched television, then turned off the lights. The bed was comfortable. The door was locked. He felt safe.

SITTING IN A PARKED CAR on Third Street in downtown Memphis at midnight was not Cal Sisson's idea of safe fun, but the doors were locked and there was a gun under the seat. His felony convictions prohibited him from owning or possessing a firearm, but this was Jack Nance's car. It was parked a couple of blocks from the Sterick Building. Nance had said it was a thirty-minute job.

Two uniformed cops strolled along the pavement and stopped fewer than five feet from Cal. They stared at him. He glanced in the mirror and saw another pair. Cal started sweating.

An unmarked police car parked behind him and two cops in plain clothes joined the others. A cop in jeans and a sweatshirt stuck his badge up to Cal's window. He slowly rolled it down. The cop leaned forward and said, 'Evening, Cal. I'm Lieutenant Byrd, Memphis PD.'

The fact that he called him Cal made him shudder. He tried to remain calm. 'What can I do for you, Officer?'

'Where's Jack?'

'Jack who?'

'Jack Nance. Your good friend. Where is he?'

'I haven't seen him.'

'Get out, Cal,' Byrd demanded, and Cal complied. Byrd slammed the door and shoved him against it. The cops surrounded him.

'Listen to me, Cal. Accomplice to breaking and entering carries seven years. You have three prior convictions, so you'll be charged as a habitual offender. You're looking at thirty years, no parole.'

Cal closed his eyes and slumped. His breathing was heavy.

'Now,' Byrd continued, very cool, 'we're not worried about Jack Nance. When he finishes with Ms Love's phones, he'll be arrested, booked, and in due course sent away. But we don't figure he'll talk much. You follow?'

Cal nodded quickly.

'But, Cal, we figure you might want to cut a deal—help us a little, and in return, we'll let you walk. OK?'

Cal stared at him desperately. 'OK.'

'When does Gronke return from New Orleans?'

'In the morning, around ten.'

'Where's he staying?'

'Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza. Room seven eighty-two.'

'Where are Bono and Pirini?'

'They're in seven eighty-three and seven eighty-four.'

'Do they have any plans to hit the boy, his family or his lawyer?'

'It's been discussed, but no definite plans.'

Suddenly Byrd grabbed his collar and pushed him harder against the car. Cal's mouth was open and his eyes showed absolute terror. 'Who burned the trailer?' Byrd snarled at him.

'Bono and Pirini,' he said, without the slightest hesitation.

'Any more fires planned?'

'Not to my knowledge.'

'If you're lying, I'll come get you, Cal.'

'I'm not lying. I swear,' Cal said in a shrill voice.

Byrd turned him loose and nodded at the pavement. The wall of cops opened and Cal walked through them. He hit the pavement at full stride and was last seen jogging into the darkness.

FRIDAY MORNING WAS COOL and clear, the first hint that the hot, sticky days of summer were coming to an end. Reggie sipped strong black coffee on the small balcony of her apartment and tried to unscramble the past five hours of her life.

The cops had called her at one thirty, said there was an emergency at her office and asked her to come down. She'd called Clint and together they had gone to her office, where a half-dozen cops were

waiting. They showed Reggie and Clint the three phones and the tiny transmitters glued into the receivers.

She checked her files and everything appeared to be in order. The police had known Nance was coming, but they wouldn't say how they knew. He was in custody now, and so far had said nothing. One cop had explained in confidence about Nance's connection with Gronke, Bono and Pirini. They had been unable to find the latter two; their hotel rooms had been abandoned. Gronke was in New Orleans, and they had him under surveillance.

The cops had gradually left. Around three, she and Clint were left alone with the startling knowledge that a man hired by killers had been there, gathering information for more killings, if necessary. The place made her nervous, and she and Clint had left shortly afterwards.

And so, with three hours' sleep, she sipped her coffee and watched the eastern sky turn orange. She thought about Mark and how he'd arrived in her office two days ago—wet from the rain and scared to death—and told her about being threatened by a man with a switchblade. It was a frightening event to hear about, but it had happened to someone else. The knife was not pointed at her.

But that was Wednesday, and this was Friday, and the same bunch of thugs had now violated her. Her little client was safely tucked away in a nice jail, and here she was, sitting alone, thinking about Bono and Pirini and who knew who else might be out there.

DOREEN WOKE MARK early. She'd fixed blueberry muffins for him and she watched him with great concern. Mark sat in a chair, holding a muffin but not eating it, just staring blankly at the floor.

'Are you OK, sweetheart?' she asked him.

'Oh, I'm fine,' he said in a hollow, hoarse voice.

Doreen patted his shoulder. 'Well, I'll be around all day,' she said as she walked to the door. 'And I'll be checking on you.'

Mark ignored her. The door slammed, and suddenly he crammed the muffin into his mouth and reached for another.

Doreen returned twenty minutes later. 'Mark, come with me,' she said. 'You have a visitor.'

He was suddenly still again. 'Who?' he said in a detached voice.

'Your lawyer.'

He stood and followed her into the hallway. 'Are you sure you're OK?' she asked, squatting in front of him. He nodded slowly and they walked to the stairs.

Reggie was waiting in a small conference room one floor below. They sat on opposite sides of a small round table.

'Are we buddies?' she asked with a smile.

'Yeah. I'm sorry about yesterday.'

'You don't need to apologise, Mark. Believe me, I understand. Have you talked to your mother?'

'Yes, ma'am. Yesterday afternoon. She sounded tired.'

'She is. I saw her before you called, and she's hanging in there. Ricky had a bad day.'

'Yeah. Thanks to those stupid cops. Let's sue them.'

'Maybe later. We need to talk about something. After you left the courtroom yesterday, Judge Roosevelt talked to the lawyers and the FBI. He wants you, your mother and Ricky placed in the Federal Witness Protection Program. He thinks it's the best way to protect you, and I tend to agree.'

'What is it?'

'The FBI moves you to a new location—a very secret one, far away from here—and you have new names, new schools, new everything. Your mother has a new job, one that pays a lot more than six dollars an hour. Government pays for everything, of course.'

'Of course, I have to tell them everything before they do all these wonderful things for us.'

'That's part of the deal.'

'I saw this once in a Mafia movie. It took them about a year to find the informant. They killed his wife, too. The Mafia never forgets, Reggie.'

'You've watched too many movies, Mark.'

'What if I don't want to meet with them? What if I want to stay in here until I'm twenty years old?'

'Fine. What about your mother and Ricky when he's released from the hospital and they have no place to go?' She paused for a moment.

'Listen, Mark, do you trust me?'

'Yes, Reggie, I do trust you. You're the only person in the world I trust right now. So please help me.'

'There's no easy way out, OK?'

'I know that.'

'Your safety is my only concern. Judge Roosevelt feels the same way. Now, it'll take a few days to work out the details of the witness programme. The judge instructed the FBI yesterday to start working on it immediately, and I think it's the best thing to do.'

'But how do you know it'll work, Reggie? Is it totally safe?'

'Nothing is totally safe, Mark. There are no guarantees.'

'Wonderful. Maybe they'll find us, maybe they won't. That'll make life exciting, won't it?'



'Do you have a better idea?'

'Sure. It's very simple. We collect the insurance money from the trailer. We find another one and we move into it. I keep my mouth shut and we live happily ever after.'

'I'm sorry, Mark, but that can't happen. You have some important information and you'll be in trouble until you give it up.'

Reggie knew things were happening too fast for the poor kid.

He rubbed his eyes and slid his chair back. He began walking round the small room, suddenly very nervous. 'So we just pack up and leave our lives behind, right? That's easy for you to say, Reggie. You'll go on like nothing ever happened. But not us. We'll live in fear for the rest of our lives.'

'You have no choice, Mark.'

'Yes I do. I could lie.'

IT WAS JUST A MOTION for a continuance, normally a rather boring and routine legal skirmish, but nothing was boring when Barry the Blade Muldanno was the defendant and Willis Upchurch was the mouthpiece. Throw in the enormous ego of Roy Foltrigg, and this innocuous little hearing took on the air of an execution. The courtroom of the Honourable James Lamond was crowded with the curious and the press.

Beyond the railing that separated the players from the spectators, Foltrigg stood in the centre of a tight circle of his assistants and whispered, frowning as if they were planning an invasion. Across the way, Muldanno pretended to ignore everyone. Willis Upchurch sat on the edge of the defence table, facing the press, while engaging in a highly animated conversation with a paralegal.

Muldanno did not yet know of the arrest of Jack Nance, eight hours earlier in Memphis. He did not know Cal Sisson had spilled his guts. He had sent Gronke back to Memphis that morning in complete ignorance of the night's events.

Foltrigg, on the other hand, was feeling quite smug. Based on the taped conversation gathered from the salt shaker, he would obtain indictments against Muldanno and Gronke for obstruction of justice. Convictions would be easy. He had Muldanno facing five years.

He'd sent Fink back to Memphis early that morning with the grand-jury subpoenas for the kid and his lawyer. He should have the kid talking by Monday afternoon; and maybe, with just a little luck, he'd have the remains of Boyette by Monday night.

The courtroom deputy stopped in front of the bench and yelled instructions for all to sit. Court was now in session, the Honourable

James Lamond presiding. The judge appeared from a side door, escorted by an assistant. In his early fifties, Lamond was a baby among federal judges. He was all business. He had been the US Attorney for the Southern District of Louisiana immediately prior to Foltrigg and he hated his successor, who had declared that his office was now much more efficient than in previous years, as much as anyone.

Lamond gazed at the crowded courtroom. 'My goodness,' he started, 'I'm delighted at the interest shown in this simple hearing.' He glared at Foltrigg, who sat in the middle of six assistants. 'The court is ready to proceed upon the motion of the defendant, Barry Muldanno, for a continuance. The court notes that this matter is set for trial three weeks from next Monday. Mr Upchurch, you may proceed. Please be brief.'

To the surprise of everyone, Upchurch was indeed brief. He simply stated what was common knowledge about the late Jerome Clifford. A continuance was necessary, he explained, with remarkable efficiency, because he needed time to prepare a defence for what would undoubtedly be a long trial.

'How much time do you need?' Lamond asked.

'Your Honour, I have a busy trial calendar. In all fairness, six months would be a reasonable delay.'

'Thank you. Anything else?'

'No, sir. Thank you, Your Honour.' Upchurch took his seat as Foltrigg was leaving his. He glanced at his notes and was about to speak when Lamond beat him to it.

'Mr Foltrigg, surely you don't deny that the defence is entitled to more time, in light of the circumstances?'

'No, Your Honour. But I think six months is too much time.'

'So how much would you suggest?'

'A month or two. You see, Your Honour, I—'

'I'm not going to listen to a haggle over two months or six or three or four, Mr Foltrigg. If you concede the defendant is entitled to a delay, then I'll take this matter under advisement and set this case for trial whenever my calendar will allow.'

'Yes, Your Honour,' Foltrigg said loudly, and started a slow burn. He had not expected to prevail in this little matter, but he certainly hadn't expected to get kicked in the teeth.

'Anything else, Mr Upchurch?' Lamond asked.

'No, sir.'

'Very well. Thanks to all of you for your interest in this matter. An order for a new trial setting will be forthcoming.'

Dianne Sway sat in a heavy wooden chair in Witness Room B, holding her elder son. After four nights of involuntary confinement in the psychiatric ward, she at first had been happy to leave it. But now that she had seen Mark and held him, and knew he was safe, she longed to return to Ricky's bed.

'They want us to go to Portland,' she said, rubbing Mark's arm. 'There's a good place for Ricky out there, and we can start over.'

'Sounds good, but it scares me.'

'Scares me too, Mark. I don't want to live the next forty years looking over my shoulder. These Mafia people are deadly.'

'I know. I've met them.'

She thought for a second, then asked, 'You what?'

'I guess it's something else I forgot to tell you.'

He took a deep breath and told her about the man and the switchblade. Normally she, or any mother, would have been shocked. But for Dianne it was just another event in this horrible week.

Reggie knocked on the door and opened it. 'We need to go,' she said. 'The judge is waiting.'

They followed her through the hall and round a corner. Two deputies trailed behind. 'Are you nervous?' Dianne whispered.

'No. It's no big deal, Mom.'

Harry was flipping through a file when they entered the courtroom. Fink and Ord were seated at their table, subdued, waiting for what would undoubtedly be a quick appearance by the kid.

Harry looked at Dianne and gave his best smile. 'Hello, Ms Sway,' he said warmly. 'It is a pleasure meeting you, and I'm sorry it has to be under these circumstances.'

'Thank you, Your Honour,' she said softly.

Harry looked at Fink with contempt. 'Now, Mr Fink, where's Mr Foltrigg?'

Sitting firmly in place, Fink answered, 'He's in New Orleans, Your Honour. I have a copy of the court order you requested.'

'Fine. I'll take your word for it. Madam Clerk, swear the witness.'

The older woman threw her hand in the air and barked at Mark, 'Raise your right hand.' Mark was sworn.

'Mark, I'm going to ask you some questions, OK?' Harry said.

'Yes, sir.'

'Prior to his death, did Mr Clifford say anything to you about a Mr Barry Muldanno?'

'I'm not going to answer that.'

'Did Mr Clifford say anything about the murder of Boyd Boyette?'

'I'm not going to answer that.'

'Did Mr Clifford say anything about the present location of the body of Boyd Boyette?'

'I'm not going to answer that.'

Harry paused to look at his notes. Dianne had stopped breathing and was staring blankly at Mark. 'It's OK. Mom,' he whispered.

Harry nodded at the bailiff. 'Take Mark back to the witness room and keep him there until we finish. He can talk to his mother before he's transported to the detention centre.'

The bailiff led Mark from the courtroom.

Harry unzipped his robe. 'Let's go off the record. Madam Clerk, you and Ms Gregg can go to lunch. Get the FBI, Mr Fink.' McThune and K.O. Lewis were fetched, and took seats behind Ord.

'Mr Lewis, you indicated before the hearing that there is an urgent matter that I should know about.'

'Yes, Your Honour. We've had Barry Muldanno under surveillance for several months, and yesterday we obtained by electronic means a conversation between him and Paul Gronke. It took place in a bar in the French Quarter, and I think you need to hear it.'

'You have the tape?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then let it roll.'

McThune placed a tape player on the table in front of Fink, and Lewis inserted a microcassette. 'The first voice you'll hear is that of Muldanno,' he explained. 'Then Gronke.'

The courtroom was still as the scratchy but very clear voices squawked from the speaker. The entire conversation was captured: the suggestion by Muldanno of hitting the kid, and Gronke's doubts; the idea of hitting the kid's mother or brother or lawyer; and the plans to bug the lawyer's phones that night.

It was chilling. Reggie closed her eyes when the taking of her life was discussed. Dianne was rigid with fear. She thought of Ricky, who was being watched by a nurse, and prayed he was safe.

'I've heard enough,' Harry said. 'Now. Ms Sway, do you understand why we've placed Mark in the detention centre?'

'I think so.'

'What would you like for me to do next?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know,' she mumbled.

Harry spoke slowly, and there was no doubt he knew exactly what should be done next. 'Reggie told me that she's discussed the Witness

Protection Program with you. Tell me what you think.'

Dianne raised her head and bit her lip. 'I do not want those people following me and my children for the rest of our lives. And I'm afraid that will happen if Mark gives you what you want.'

'I think you'll be safe, Ms Sway. There are thousands of government witnesses now being protected.'

'But some have been found, haven't they?'

It was a quiet question that hit hard. Neither McThune nor Lewis could deny the fact. There was a long, awkward silence.

Dianne cleared her throat and spoke in a stronger voice. 'This is the Mafia, isn't it? Your Honour, when you guys can show me a way to completely protect my children, then I'll help you. But not until then.'

Fink slumped in his chair. Harry looked at his watch. 'I suggest we meet again Monday at noon. Let's take things one day at a time.'

PAUL GRONKE FINISHED his unexpected trip to Minneapolis as the Northwest 727 lifted off the runway and started for Atlanta. From Atlanta he hoped to catch a direct flight to New Orleans, and once home he had no plans to leave for a long time. Regardless of his friendship with Muldanno, Gronke was tired of this mess. He did not enjoy stalking little kids and waving switchblades at them.

That morning, as soon as his flight from New Orleans had arrived at Memphis Airport, he'd made two phone calls. The first call spooked him because no one answered. He then dialled a back-up number and again there was no answer. Either the cops had Bono and Pirini or they had been forced to pull up stakes. Neither thought was comforting. He walked quickly to the Northwest ticket counter and paid cash for a one-way ticket to Minneapolis. Then he found the Delta counter and paid cash for a one-way ticket to Dallas-Fort Worth. He roamed the concourses for an hour, watching his back and seeing nothing, and at the last second hopped on Northwest.

Muldanno would flip out. He'd run to his uncle and borrow some more thugs. They'd descend upon Memphis and start hurting people. Finesse was not Barry's long suit.

Gronke's friendship with Muldanno had started in the tenth grade, their last year of formal education before they began hustling on the streets of New Orleans. Their first venture was a fencing operation that was wildly successful. Now Gronke made a nice living off his clubs and beer joints. He was not Mafia. When Barry started his killing, Gronke established more distance between them.

But they remained friends. A month or so after Boyette disappeared, the two of them spent a long weekend at Johnny Sulari's



house in Acapulco. One night Barry was drinking tequila and talking more than usual. Sipping from a bottle of Cuervo Gold, he bragged to his friend about the killing. The waste site in Lafourche Parish was worth millions to the Sulari family. The senator had been an unexpected enemy who had become the biggest obstacle to Johnny's gold mine. The decision was made to hit Boyette.

Barry stalked him for six months and learned that the senator regularly stopped at a seedy roadhouse halfway between New Orleans and Houma, the site of the project. The hit was easy, Barry said. He trailed Boyette after a rowdy waste-site meeting in Houma and waited patiently outside the roadhouse. When Boyette emerged, he hit him on the head with a nightstick and threw him in the back seat. He stopped a few miles down the road and pumped four bullets into his head. Then Barry hid the body. Gronke was tempted to ask where, but thought better of it.

The case against him was shaky. Barry's car had been cleaned and sanitised—no blood samples, no fibres or hair. The star of the government's case was a Mafia informant who was not expected to live to testify. A .22-calibre Ruger had been seized from Barry's apartment, but with no corpse it was impossible to determine the cause of death. Besides, juries are hesitant to convict without first knowing for certain that the victim is indeed dead. And now an eleven-year-old kid in Memphis knew where Boyette was buried.

AT THREE ON FRIDAY afternoon Harry Roosevelt's patience was gone. His weekend would be spent in the Ozark Mountains, fishing with his two sons; as he looked at the courtroom, still crowded with deadbeat dads awaiting sentencing for nonpayment of child support, his mind kept wandering to thoughts of cool mountain streams.

Harry wanted to adjourn by four, but it looked doubtful. His sons waited in the back row. Outside, the Jeep was packed and when the gavel finally rapped for the last time, they would whisk His Honour away to the Buffalo River. That was the plan, anyway.

Reggie eased into the courtroom and made her way to the clerk. They whispered for a minute, with Reggie pointing to a document she'd brought with her. Harry motioned her to the bench.

'Something wrong?' he asked.

'I need a quick favour. Mark's fine. It's another case.'

Harry smiled. 'What is it?' he asked.

Reggie handed him an order. 'It's a snatch-and-run by the welfare department,' she said in a low voice. 'Ronald Thomas was taken into custody last night and placed in a foster home. It's a long story, but I

assure you this kid has good parents and a clean home.'

'And you want the kid released?'

'Immediately. I'll pick him up myself.'

'And take him home and feed him lasagne.'

'Of course.'

Harry scanned the order and signed his name at the bottom.

'I saw Damon and Al back there,' Reggie said.

Harry handed the order to the clerk, who stamped it. 'When I get this riffraff cleared from my courtroom, we're going fishing.'

'Good luck. I'll see you Monday,' Reggie winked at him and backed away from the bench. The clerk handed her a copy of the order and she left the courtroom.

THOMAS FINK ENTERED Foltrigg's office at four thirty on Friday afternoon. Roy was at his desk; Wally Boxx was on the sofa, writing a speech or a press release. Fink removed his jacket and sat down.

'Where are the grand-jury subpoenas?' Foltrigg asked.

'I hand-delivered them to the US marshal in Memphis, with strict instructions not to serve them until he heard from you.'

Roy rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair. 'So what's the kid gonna do, Thomas? What's gonna happen?'

'I don't know. It's obvious the kid has no plans to talk any time soon. He and his mother are terrified. They're convinced they won't be safe in witness protection.'

'I have no choice but to use the subpoenas,' Foltrigg said gravely. 'It's time we got these people down here, on our turf, and made them talk. Don't you agree, Thomas?'

Fink was not in full agreement. 'The kid is under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court up there, and I'm not sure what'll happen when he gets the subpoena.'

Roy was smiling. 'That's right, but the court is closed until Monday. I don't think the locals in Memphis will interfere with the US marshal's office. We'll be calling the shots.'

'Speaking of Monday, Judge Roosevelt wants us in his courtroom at noon.'

Roy had a good laugh at this. 'He'll be a lonely judge, won't he? You, me, the kid and the kid's lawyer will all be down here.'

Fink did not join his laughter.

AT FIVE DOREEN KNOCKED on the door and rattled keys until it opened.

Mark was on the floor playing draughts against himself, and

immediately became a zombie. He sat on his feet and stared at the draughts board as if in a trance.

'Mark, honey, I'm worried about you. I get off duty in five minutes but I'll tell Telda to watch you real close, OK? Will you be all right till I get back in the morning?'

'Maybe,' he moaned.

'Poor child. You got no business in here.'

'I'll make it.'

Telda was much less concerned than Doreen. She checked on Mark twice. On her third visit to his room she brought visitors. Mark was about to do his trance routine when he saw the two large men in suits. The room was suddenly tiny.

'Hi,' said the first one. He was holding some papers. 'I'm Vern Duboski, deputy US marshal. You are Mark Sway?'

He nodded, unable to speak.

'Don't be afraid, Mark. We just have to give you these papers.'

'What are they?' he asked nervously.

'It's a subpoena, and it means that you have to appear before a federal grand jury on Monday, in New Orleans. We're gonna come get you tomorrow afternoon and drive you down.'

His mouth was dry. 'Have you told my mother?' he asked.

'Well, you see, Mark, we're required to give her a copy of these same papers. We'll explain everything to her.'

'I have a lawyer, you know. Have you told her?'

'No. But you're welcome to call her if you like.'

They left him leaning on the wall for support, more confused than ever, scared to death. And angry. The system was rotten. He was sick of laws and lawyers and courts, of cops and agents and marshals, of reporters and judges and jailers.

He swore to the walls that he would not go to New Orleans.

TWO OTHER DEPUTY MARSHALS would serve Dianne, and two more would serve Ms Reggie Love at home, all at roughly the same time. In reality, one deputy marshal could have served all three subpoenas in an hour. But it was more fun to use six men in three cars, with radios and telephones and guns, and to strike quickly under cover of darkness like a Special Forces assault unit.

Dianne Sway took the subpoena from the polite gentlemen without comment. When two other deputy marshals knocked on Momma Love's kitchen door and she appeared behind the screen, she instantly knew they were trouble. During the nightmare of Reggie's divorce, there had been several deputies in dark suits standing at her doorway

at odd hours. These guys always brought trouble.

'Can I help you?' she asked with a forced smile.

'Yes, ma'am. We're looking for one Reggie Love.'

They even talked like cops. 'And who are you?' she asked.

'I'm Mike Hedley and this is Terry Flagg. We're US marshals.'

'US marshals or deputy US marshals? Let me see some ID.'

This shocked them, and in perfect synchronisation they reached into their pockets for their badges. 'We're deputy marshals, ma'am.'

'That's not what you said,' she said, examining the badges held up to the screen door. 'Why do you want one Reggie Love?'

'We're supposed to serve her with a subpoena. She has to appear before a grand jury in New Orleans on Monday. We can just leave it with you, if you like.'

'I'm not accepting service of it,' she said. 'You have to actually serve her, if I'm not mistaken.'

'Where is she?'

'She doesn't live here.'

'That's her car,' Hedley said, nodding at Reggie's Mazda.

'She doesn't live here,' Momma Love repeated.

'But I think she's here,' Hedley said, suddenly aggressive.

'You're not paid to think, son. You're paid to serve those papers, and I'm telling you she's not here. Now get off my property.'

'I hope you're not obstructing the service of a federal subpoena,' Hedley said ominously.

'And I hope you're not trying to threaten an old woman.'

They surrendered and backed away. 'We'll be back,' Hedley promised as he opened his car door.

'I'll be here,' she shouted as they backed into the street. She waited for five minutes and, when she was certain they were gone, she went to Reggie's apartment over the garage.

THOUGH CLINT'S APARTMENT was only fifteen minutes away, the drive took Reggie almost an hour. She zigzagged through midtown and, when she was certain she was not being followed, she parked on the street and walked four blocks to his apartment.

His nine-o'clock date had been abruptly cancelled—a date with a lot of promise. 'I'm sorry,' Reggie said as he opened the door.

'That's OK. Are you all right?' He took her overnight bag and waved at the sofa. 'Sit down.'

Reggie was no stranger to the apartment. She found a Diet Coke in the refrigerator and sat on a bar stool. 'I need to call Dianne.'

Clint handed her a phone. She punched the numbers from memory.

Reggie managed three words to Dianne before she was forced to listen. Subpoenas were everywhere. One for Dianne, one for Mark. Dianne had called the detention centre but couldn't get through to Mark. Reggie, badly shaken herself, tried to convince Dianne everything was fine. She promised to call her in the morning, then hung up.

'This is pretty slick, Clint. Foltrigg waited until late Friday afternoon to serve subpoenas for Monday morning, so we're forced to find the federal judge in New Orleans and beg him to allow an emergency hearing to quash the subpoenas.'

'It won't work, Reggie.'

'Of course it won't work. That's the way Foltrigg planned it.' She gulped the Diet Coke. 'But if I can dodge the subpoena until Monday, Foltrigg will be forced to issue another one. Then maybe I'll have time to quash. The problem is Mark. We have to figure out a way to keep him here, Clint.'

## —14—

Lights-out check at the juvenile detention centre was at 10pm. Telda unlocked Mark's door. The light was on, and this irritated her. She stepped inside, glanced at the bunks, but he wasn't there.

Then she saw him beside the toilet. He was curled tightly with his knees on his chest, breathing heavily. Sweat ran to his eyebrows and dripped from the tip of his nose. His face was crimson. His eyes were closed, and his left thumb was in his mouth.

'Mark!' she shouted, suddenly terrified. 'Mark! Oh, my Lord!' She ran from the room to get help and was back within seconds with Denny, her partner, who took a quick look.

'He's soaking wet,' Denny said.

Telda was pinching his wrist. 'His pulse is crazy. Look at him breathe. Call an ambulance!'

Denny lumbered from the room, and Telda picked Mark up and carefully placed him on the bottom bunk, where he curled up again. Denny was back with a clipboard. 'This must be Doreen's handwriting. Says here to check on him every half-hour and, if there's any doubt, to rush him to St Peter's and call Dr Greenway.'

'This is all my fault,' Telda said. 'I shouldn't have allowed those damned marshals in here. Scared the poor boy to death.'

Denny knelt beside her and, with a thick thumb, peeled back Mark's right eyelid.



'This kid's in trouble,' he said, with the gravity of a brain surgeon.

'Get a washcloth over here,' Telda said, and Denny did as told. 'Doreen was telling me this is what happened to his little brother. They saw that shooting and the little one's been in shock ever since.' Denny handed her the cloth and she wiped Mark's forehead.

'Damn, his heart's gonna explode,' Denny said, on his knees again next to Telda. 'He's breathing like crazy.'

'Poor kid. I should've run those marshals off,' Telda said:

'I would have. They got no right coming on this floor.' He jabbed another thumb into the left eye, and Mark twitched. Then he started the moaning—a low, dull sound from deep in the throat.

A paramedic from the main jail, three floors down, ran into the room. He gripped Mark's wrist to find the pulse. 'Hurry up with the stretcher to the fourth floor,' he barked into his radio. 'Got a kid in bad shape.'

Denny stuck the clipboard in front of the paramedic. 'Says here to take him to St Peter's. Dr Greenway.'

The stretcher arrived with two more paramedics. Mark was quickly laid on it and a strap was placed across him. His eyes never opened but he managed to groan and to keep the thumb in his mouth.

THE RIDE TO ST PETER'S took less than ten minutes, half as long as the wait once they arrived. St Peter's received the vast majority of Memphis knife wounds, gunshot victims and mangled bodies from weekend car wrecks. The place was in chaos.

The paramedics rolled Mark inside and stopped near other stretchers. While they filled in forms, a small army of nurses and doctors scrambled round another new patient. Finally a nurse stopped for a second and asked the paramedics, 'What is it?'

'Looks like stress or shock or something. Runs in the family.'

'He's not bleeding, so he can wait. Roll him to intake.'

They wove the stretcher through heavy traffic and stopped in a room off the main hallway. The forms were presented to another nurse, who scribbled something without looking at Mark. 'Where's Dr Greenway?' she asked the paramedics. 'You haven't called him?'

'Well, no.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Look, this is a war zone. Psychiatric emergencies do not get top priority around here.'

'You signed the forms, lady. He's all yours.'

They smiled at her and headed for the door.

Mark opened his eyes slightly. The nurse answered the phone, said a few words and left the room. Mark quickly unhooked the strap and

jumped to the floor. The forms she'd been holding were on the counter. He grabbed them and pushed through the door. He threw the forms in a rubbish bin, then eased through the throng of sick and wounded in admissions. He smiled as he rode his favourite escalator to the basement.

CLINT HAD JUST fallen asleep on the sofa when the phone rang. Reggie grabbed it. 'Hello.'

'Hi, Reggie. It's me, Mark.'

'Mark! How are you, dear? How'd you find me?'

'I called Momma Love and she gave me Clint's number.'

'But how'd you get to a phone? It's awful late.'

'Well, I'm not in jail any more. I'm at St Peter's Hospital. I had an attack of post-traumatic-stress syndrome, and they rushed me over in an ambulance.'

'Are you OK?'

'Great. What's this grand-jury stuff?'

'Nothing but an attempt to scare you into talking.'

'Well, it worked. I'm more scared than ever.'

'You sound fine. I mean, you don't sound like you're in shock.'

'I faked them out, Reggie, OK? I jogged in my cell for half an hour, and when they found me I was soaking wet and in bad shape.'

Clint sat up on the sofa and listened intently.

'Have you seen a doctor?' she asked, frowning at Clint.

'Not exactly.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means I walked out of the emergency room. It means I've escaped, Reggie. It was so easy.'

'Oh, my Lord! Mark, you can't do this. You can't escape.'

'I have escaped, Reggie. And I'm not going back. I already talked to my mother on the phone.'

'But where are you? In which room?'

'In the morgue.'

'The morgue?'

Clint bolted to his feet and stood beside her. 'Who's in the morgue?' he whispered. She frowned at him and shook her head.

'Mom said they have a subpoena for you, too. Is this true?'

'Yes. But they haven't served me. That's why I'm here at Clint's. If they don't hand me the subpoena, I don't have to go. But, Mark, you can't hide for ever.'

'Neither can you.'

'You're right, Mark. So what do we do?'

'I don't know. I really would like to leave Memphis. I'm sick of cops and jails. Will you help me, Reggie? I'm really scared.'

'Yes, Mark. I'll help you.'

'OK, Reggie. Come to the parking lot. Drive real slow, just like you're looking for a place to park. I'll be hiding between some cars.'

'I'll be in Clint's car. It's a black Honda Accord.'

'Good. Hurry.'

'I'm on my way. Be careful, Mark.'

'Relax, Reggie. This is just like the movies.'

She hung up, and took a deep breath. 'Mark's escaped from jail. He's hiding in the morgue of St Peter's.'

'What was that about my car?' Clint asked.

'They're looking for me, too.'

'You're crazy, Reggie. You can't run away with an escaped . . . I don't know . . . whatever he is. You'll lose your licence.'

'I need your keys, and your credit cards.'

'My credit cards! Look, Reggie, I love you, sweetheart, but—'

'Stay by the phone, OK? Don't leave. I'll call you later.'

He reached into his pockets, thoroughly defeated. She grabbed his keys and credit cards, then kissed him on the cheek. 'Thanks, Clint. Take care of Momma Love.'

She eased through the door and disappeared into the darkness.

FROM THE MOMENT MARK jumped into the car and hid on the floor, Reggie became an accomplice to his escape. But if they were caught, it would be her first offence. Maybe she could pull strings and keep her licence to practise.

Mark remained under the dashboard until she turned onto Union Avenue and headed for the river. Then he sprang into the seat and surveyed the landscape.

It was almost 1am, and the six lanes of Union Avenue were deserted. She drove three blocks while waiting for Mark to speak.

'So where are we going?' she finally asked.

'Well, right now, I just want to leave Memphis. Let's cross the bridge by the Pyramid, OK?'

'Fair enough. You want to go to Arkansas?'

'Why not? Yeah, sure, let's go to Arkansas.'

Reggie turned right onto Riverside Drive. They entered Interstate 40 at the downtown ramp and were on the bridge over the Mississippi River. Mark gazed at the brightly lit Pyramid to the right, then spun round to admire the Memphis skyline fading in the distance. He stared in awe as if he'd never seen it before. Reggie

wondered if the poor child had ever left Memphis.

They drove over the bridge and into Arkansas. The highway was flat and lined on both sides by truck stops and motels. He turned to admire the Memphis skyline once more, but it was gone.

‘What are you looking for?’ she asked.

‘Memphis. I like to look at the tall buildings downtown. I saw a movie once about this little rich kid who lived in a tall building in a city, and he roamed around the streets just having a great time. At night he’d sit on the balcony and watch the streets below. That would be a wonderful way to live. No trailers. No trashy neighbours.’

‘You can have it, Mark. You can live in a tall building in a big city, or you can live in a cabin in the mountains. Right now the FBI will give you and your mom whatever you want.’

‘Yeah, but who wants it if you’re afraid of your shadow? And I’m worried about Mom. I called her, you know, before I called you. Told her about the escape. Reggie, I don’t want to be scared for the rest of my life. These people will get me one day, Reggie. I know they will.’

‘So what do you do, Mark?’

‘I don’t know, but I’ve been thinking about something. What if Romey told me a lie? He was out of his mind, and said all sorts of weird things, and at first I believed him. But now, well, I’m not so sure.’

She was hanging on every word, but she had no idea where he was going with this.

‘But I couldn’t take a chance, right? I mean, if Romey was lying, I’m off the hook, right? But what if I’d told the cops and they found the body right where Romey said? Everybody’s happy but the Mafia, and who knows what would happen to me? It was too big a risk.’ He paused for half a mile. ‘So I’ve had a brainstorm.’

By now she could almost feel his brainstorm. ‘And what might that be?’ she asked nervously.

‘I think we should see if Romey was lying or not.’

She cleared her dry throat. ‘You mean, go find the body?’

‘That’s right.’

She wanted to laugh. ‘You must be kidding.’

‘Well, let’s talk about it. You and I are both expected to be in New Orleans Monday morning, and now we’re on the run, right? Just you and me, Bonnie and Clyde, running from the cops.’

‘I guess you could say that.’

‘Where’s the last place they’d look for us? Think about it, Reggie. Where’s the last place in the world they’d expect us to run to?’

‘New Orleans.’

'Right. Now, if you can get us to New Orleans, then we'll find Romey's house.'

'Why Romey's house?'

'That's where the body's supposed to be.'

Romey's house? The victim of the murder was buried at the home of the accused's lawyer? This was beyond bizarre. She was suddenly aware that he was staring at her with a curious smile.

'Now you know, Reggie,' he said.

'But how? Why?'

'I don't know. It's crazy. That's why I think Romey could've made it up. But we won't know until we look. If it's not there, we tell the cops and I'm off the hook. Life returns to normal.'

'Look, Mark—son, client, friend—if you think I'm going to New Orleans to dig up a dead body, you're crazy. I won't do it.'

'Why not, Reggie?'

'It's much too dangerous, Mark. It could get us killed. I won't go, and I can't let you do it. Besides, what if we find the body?'

'Good question. If we find the body, and you call the FBI and tell them you know exactly where it is, then they'll give us anything we want. A nice house. Plenty of money.'

'Then why not cut a deal and tell them now?'

'Because I don't trust the FBI. I'm not willing to give them what they want until me, my mother and my brother are already far away. It'll take some time to move Ricky. If I told them now, the bad guys might find out before we can disappear. It's too risky.'

'Good point.'

'So let's go to New Orleans. We can always chicken out once we get there.' He leaned forward and carefully inspected the radio.

'This is completely crazy, Mark.'

'I know. It's been a bad week.'



Traffic was light in the predawn hours as Jason McThune headed for the Federal Building downtown. So much for a quiet Saturday with the kids. He flipped through his black book, found K.O. Lewis and punched numbers on his car phone.

'Just how could an eleven-year-old kid disappear while in police custody?' K.O. demanded.

McThune told him what the police had said, which was nothing, and asked him to be ready to come to Memphis. It could be a long weekend.



At the office, McThune called Larry Trumann in New Orleans and was delighted when he answered the phone disorientated and obviously trying to sleep. This was Trumann's case, though McThune had worked on it all week. And just for fun he called George Ord and asked him to come on down with the rest of the gang.

By seven three FBI agents were in his office, gulping coffee and speculating wildly. Ord arrived next, then Ray Trimble, deputy chief of police.

In fluent cop talk, Trimble got right to the point. 'Subject was transported from the detention centre by ambulance to St Peter's Emergency Room around ten thirty last night. Paramedics are certain a nurse, one Gloria Watts, signed subject in, but no paperwork can be found. Ms Watts has stated she had subject in ER intake room, and was called out of room for no more than ten minutes, and upon her return, subject was gone. She assumed subject had been taken for treatment. At approximately five this morning, Ms Watts was preparing to leave her shift and checked the intake records. She thought of the subject and began asking questions. Subject could not be found in ER, and admissions had no record of his arrival. Hospital security was called, then Memphis PD. At this time a search of the hospital is under way.'

'It took six hours to realise the kid was missing,' McThune said in disbelief.

'Yes, sir. But we don't run the hospital, you see.'

'Why was the kid taken to the hospital?'

Trimble handed McThune a copy of Telda's report.

McThune read it carefully. 'Says he went into shock after the US marshals left. What on earth were the marshals doing there?'

Trimble handed McThune the subpoena. He read it carefully, then handed it to George Ord.

'Have you talked to the kid's mother, Chief?' McThune asked.

'No, sir,' said Trimble. 'Not yet. She's still asleep. We're watching the room in case he tries to get to her.'

'I'll talk to her first, Chief. I'll be over in about an hour. Make sure no one sees her before I do.'

'No problem.'

'Thank you, Chief.'

Trimble clicked his heels together and was gone.

McThune looked at Ord. 'What about the subpoena?' he asked.

'I can't believe it. Foltrigg's lost his mind. This kid is under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. Would you want to get Harry Roosevelt mad?'

'I don't think so. We need to call him. I'll do it, and you call Reggie Love. I'd rather not talk to her.'

Ord left the room to find a phone. McThune raced through a phone book until he found the Roosevelts. But there was no Harry. If he had a number, it was unlisted.

AT EIGHT MCTHUNE LEFT the elevator on the ninth floor of St Peter's. Three agents, decked out in a splendid variety of hospital garb, walked with him to room 943. Security guards stood at the door. McThune knocked gently and motioned the squadron away. He didn't want to scare the poor woman.

The door opened slightly. 'Yes?' came a voice from the darkness.

'Ms Sway, I'm Jason McThune, special agent, FBI. I saw you in court yesterday. Can I talk to you in private?'

'Is something the matter?' she asked.

'Yes, ma'am.'

She took a deep breath, eased through the door and closed it behind her. They walked slowly in the centre of the empty hall.

'I don't suppose you've talked to Mark?' McThune said.

'He called me yesterday afternoon from the jail,' she said.

'Since then?'

'No,' she lied. 'Why?'

'He's missing.'

She hesitated for a step. 'What do you mean, he's missing?' McThune gave her a quick version of Mark's disappearance.

'My God, do you think the Mafia's got him?' she asked.

McThune shook his head confidently. 'No. They don't even know. We've been searching the hospital for three hours, but I think he just walked away. Where would he go?'

'I have no idea.' Dianne lit a cigarette.

'Well, let me ask you something. We can't find Reggie Love either. Is it possible Mark's with her?'

'It's possible, I guess.' I hope so, she thought.

'Where would they be—you know, the two of them together?'

'How the heck am I supposed to know? You're the FBI.'

McThune felt stupid. His was not a bright question, and she was not as frail as he thought.

Dianne puffed her cigarette. Knowing Mark, he was probably changing nappies in the nursery or assisting with surgery in orthopaedics. And he might call her. 'I need to get back,' she said.

'If he contacts you, I need to know it.'

'Sure.'

'And if you hear from Reggie Love, I'd appreciate a call. I'll leave two men here on this floor in case you need them.'

She walked away.

BY EIGHT THIRTY FOLTRIGG had assembled in his office the usual crew of Wally Boxx, Thomas Fink and Larry Trumann.

'McThune called me five minutes ago. The lawyer's missing, too,' Trumann announced as he poured coffee from a Thermos.

'Does McThune think the kid's with the lawyer?' Boxx asked.

'Who knows? She'd be kind of stupid to help the kid escape, wouldn't she?'

'She's not that bright,' Foltrigg said scornfully.

Neither are you, thought Trumann. You're the idiot who issued the subpoenas that started this latest episode. 'McThune's spoken with K.O. Lewis. He's ready to zip to Memphis.'

'Has McThune called in the dogs?' Foltrigg asked.

'Yeah. He's got everyone in his office working on it. They've even sent two men to find Judge Roosevelt, who's fishing somewhere in the mountains.'

'Have they found the lawyer's car?' Foltrigg asked.

'No. They're still looking.'

'I'll bet they don't find it in Memphis. I'll bet the kid and Ms Love are in the car somewhere far away.'

AT NINE THIRTY a Memphis policeman called in the registration number of an illegally parked Mazda. It belonged to one Reggie Love. The message was quickly sent to Jason McThune at his office.

Ten minutes later, two FBI agents knocked on the door of apartment number 28 at Bellevue Gardens. They waited, and knocked again. Clint hid in the bedroom. They knocked a third time and the phone started to ring. It startled him and he almost lunged for it. But his answering machine was on. If the cops would come to his apartment, then they would certainly not hesitate to call. After the tone he heard Reggie's voice. He lifted the receiver and quickly whispered, 'Reggie, call me right back.' He hung up.

They knocked a fourth time and left. He stared at the phone until it finally rang again. 'Good morning, Clint,' Reggie said cheerfully. 'How are things in Memphis?'

'Oh, the usual. You know, cops watching my apartment, banging on the door. Typical Saturday.'

'Cops?'

'Yeah. And for the past hour I've been sitting watching television.'

Mark's on every channel. Right now it's simply a disappearance, not an escape. Where are you?

'We've checked into a motel in Metairie.'

'I'm sorry. Did you say Metairie? As in Louisiana? Right outside of New Orleans?'

'That's the place. We drove all night.'

'Of all the places to hide, why pick a suburb of New Orleans?'

'Because it's the last place we'd be expected. We're safe, Clint.'

'Come on, Reggie, what's going on?'

'I'll explain later. I'll call back this afternoon.'

Clint placed the phone on the table and stretched on the unmade bed, thinking that Reggie had lost her mind.

BARRY THE BLADE ENTERED the warehouse alone. Gone was the smirking scowl of the cocky street hood. Gone were the flashy suit and the earring. The ponytail was tucked under his collar. He was anxious as he climbed the rusted steps to the second level and stopped at a metal door. He pushed a button and looked directly into the camera above his head. A loud click, and the door opened. He walked through and entered his uncle's office.

'Bad news, Barry?' Johnny Sulari asked, knowing the answer.

'You might say so. The kid's disappeared in Memphis.'

'How could you be so stupid?' Johnny asked calmly. 'Stupid to leave the body around here. Stupid to tell your lawyer. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.' He stared icily at his nephew.

Barry nodded in agreement, now penitent. 'I need help, OK?'

'Of course you need help. You've done a very stupid thing, and now you need someone to rescue you.'

'It concerns all of us, I think.'

'Oh, really?' Johnny's eyes flashed pure anger, but he controlled himself. He was always under control. 'Barry, answer my questions slowly, OK? I don't wanna know too much, you understand?'

Barry nodded and watched the floor.

'Is the body here in the city?'

'Yeah.'

Johnny shook his head in disgust. 'Is it underground?'

'Yeah.'

'How long will it take to dig it up?'

'An hour, maybe two. It's in concrete.'

'Concrete,' Johnny repeated. 'How many men?'

'Two or three. I can't do it. They're watching every move I make. If I go near the place, I'll just lead them to it.'

'A parking lot? A sidewalk?'

'Under a garage.' Barry kept his eyes on the floor.

'A garage. A parking garage?'

'A garage behind a house.'

'You mean a house on a street, with other houses near it?'

'Yeah.' It wasn't such a bad idea, at the time.

'Whose house?' Johnny asked, stone-faced and ready to explode.

Barry swallowed hard. 'Jerome Clifford's.'

There was no eruption. Johnny took pride in staying cool. 'Jerome Clifford's house,' he repeated. 'And you want me to send in some men to dig it up, without making a sound, and dispose of it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What if they get caught?'

'They won't get caught.'

'How'd you bury him in concrete without getting caught?'

'After I hit him, I unloaded the body and six bags of ready-mix at the garage. No one noticed. I went back the next night. There's a park behind the house, and I just walked through the trees and sneaked into the garage. The floor is gravel so I dug a shallow grave, put the body in it and mixed the concrete. I covered it with gravel. Romey's got this old boat, and so I rolled the boat over it. Everything was perfect. Clifford never had a clue.'

'Until you told him, of course.' Johnny was nervous now. 'We've always used the Gulf of Mexico. Whatever happened to barrels and chains and weights?'

'I promise it won't happen again. Just help me now.'

Johnny pinched the bridge of his nose. 'I guess it's urgent.'

'Tonight. This kid's on the loose. He's scared, and it's just a matter of time before he tells someone. Give me three men. I'll tell them exactly how to do it so they won't get caught.'

Johnny nodded slowly, painfully. 'OK, OK.' He stared at Barry. 'Now get the hell outta here.'

AFTER SEVEN HOURS of searching, Chief Trimble declared St Peter's to be free of Mark Sway. The kid had eluded them. Trimble called McThune at his office with the news. McThune was not surprised. The hospital had consented to the wiring of the phone in room 943; two agents, posing as orderlies, had switched phones in the room while Dianne was down the hall, talking to the police.

Harry Roosevelt had been located in a rented boat somewhere along the Buffalo River in Arkansas. He was livid, to say the least, and was now en route back to the city.



K.O. Lewis was already on board Director Voyles's jet, and he would arrive at the airport around two.

An all-points bulletin for Mark Sway had been on the national wire since early morning. McThune was reluctant to add the name of Reggie Love to it but, as the morning dragged on, he became convinced that their disappearances were more than coincidental. At eleven he added her name and description to the APB.

A phone call came from the hospital. 'Yeah,' McThune barked at the phone.

The agent was in room 945, next door to Ricky's. He spoke in a guarded voice. 'Jason, we just heard a phone call from Clint Van Hooser to Dianne Sway. He told her he had just talked to Reggie, that she and Mark were in New Orleans, and everything was fine.'

'New Orleans!'

'That's what he said. No indication of exactly where.'

McThune immediately called Larry Trumann in New Orleans.

THE HOUSE WAS in the bend of an old, shady street, and as they approached it Mark slid down in the seat until only his eyes and the top of his head were visible in the window. He was wearing a black and gold Saints cap Reggie had bought him, along with a pair of jeans and two sweatshirts. A street map, folded badly, was stuffed beside the handbrake.

They drove by without the slightest decrease in speed. Reggie was trying not to appear suspicious. She, too, wore a Saints cap, solid black, and her eyes were hidden behind large sunglasses. It was 3pm, hours before dark.

She held her breath as they passed the mailbox with the name Clifford on it. It was a big house, but not spectacular for this neighbourhood. It was of English Tudor design, with ivy covering most of the front. It sat on a large lot, surrounded by dozens of heavy oaks. The driveway ran along a thick hedge and disappeared round to the back. Perhaps it was the perfect place to hide a body.

'There's the garage,' Mark said. It stood fifty or so feet from the house. A red Triumph Spitfire was on blocks next to it. A ragged hedgerow over six foot high ran along one side of the garage and blocked the view of the nearest house, which was about a hundred feet away. Behind the garage the lawn stopped at a chainlink fence, and beyond the fence was a heavily wooded area.

When the house was out of sight, Mark sat straight in the seat.

The black Accord moved through the neighbourhood and stopped near a tennis court in an open area called West Park. Reggie unfolded

the street map, which she had already studied. A biker approached on an asphalt trail and Mark watched as he disappeared into the woods.

'This is the place,' she said.

'Do you want to chicken out?' he asked.

'Sort of.' Reggie was folding the map. 'But I guess we can try, and if we get spooked we'll just run back here.' She opened her door. 'Let's go for a walk.'

The bike trail ran beside a soccer field, then cut through a dense wood. Tree branches met overhead, giving a tunnel-like darkness. Sunlight flickered through the trees intermittently. An occasional biker passed them on the asphalt.

Mark missed his bike. After three days in the hospital, two days in jail, seven hours in the car and six hours in the motel, he thought how nice it would be if he and Ricky were here, racing through the trees without a worry in the world. Just kids again.

'What am I doing here?' he asked, barely audible.

'It was your idea,' she said, hands stuck deep in her jeans. 'You want to go home?'

'What's home?'

'Memphis. I'll take you back to your mother.'

'Yeah, but I won't stay with her, will I? They'd grab me and off I'd go, back to see Harry, who'd really be ticked, wouldn't he?'

'Yeah. But I can work on Harry.'

Nobody worked on Harry, Mark had decided. Harry would send him back to the detention centre, where they'd probably put leg chains on him and throw him into solitary.

'I can't go back, Reggie. Not now.'

Reggie stopped after half a mile. To the left was an open grassy area with a pavilion in the centre for picnics. To the right a small foot trail ventured deeper into the trees. 'Let's try this,' she said, and they left the bike route. The trail soon gave out and disappeared. They wove through trees and undergrowth until they found a small clearing. The sun was suddenly bright. Reggie shielded her eyes with her hand and looked at a straight row of trees stretching before them.

She pointed. 'I think that's the creek,' she said.

'What creek?'

'According to the map, Clifford's street borders West Park, and there's a little creek running behind his house.'

The creek was nothing but a dry bed of sand and litter. They picked their way down through the undergrowth, then climbed the steep opposite bank. Reggie was breathing hard when they stopped. 'Are you scared?' she asked.

‘No. Are you?’

‘Of course. And you are, too. Do you want to keep going?’

‘Sure. And I’m not afraid.’ He was terrified, but there was a certain thrill in sneaking through the jungle like this. He’d done it a thousand times round the trailer park. He knew to watch for snakes and poison ivy. He’d learned how to keep from getting lost. He suddenly crouched low and darted ahead into the trees. ‘Follow me.’

‘This is not a game, Mark. Now slow down.’

The first fence they saw was made of cedar. They stayed in the trees and moved along behind the houses. The woods and undergrowth thickened but a small trail ran parallel to the houses.

Then they saw it. On the other side of a chainlink fence, the red Triumph Spitfire sat next to Romey’s garage. The woods stopped less than twenty feet from the fence, and between it and the rear wall of the garage a dozen oaks with Spanish moss shaded the back yard.

Not surprisingly, Romey was a slob. He had piled boards and bricks, buckets and rakes, all sorts of debris behind the garage.

There was a small gate in the chainlink fence. The garage had a door in the rear wall. The garden was overgrown and the weeds along the fence were knee-high. They squatted in the trees and stared at the garage, Reggie trying to catch her breath.

‘Are we gonna go in there?’ Mark asked.

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘We’ve come far enough.’ She stayed low and began backing away. ‘I’m leaving now,’ she said.

K.O. LEWIS NEVER left the plane. McThune’s men were waiting when it landed and they rushed aboard. They left for New Orleans, where Larry Trumann now waited anxiously.

Lewis didn’t like it. What was he supposed to do in New Orleans? It was a big tourist and convention city, with thousands of hotel rooms and crowded streets. Until Reggie and Mark made a mistake, it would be impossible to find them.

But Director Voyles wanted him on the scene, and so off he went to New Orleans. Find the kid and make him talk—those were his instructions. Promise him anything.



Two of the three, Leo and Ionucci, were veteran leg-breakers for the Sulari family and were actually related by blood to Barry the Blade. The third, a huge kid with a wide neck, was known simply as the Bull.

He had been sent on this unusual errand to perform most of the grunt work. Barry assured them it would not be difficult. The concrete was thin. Chip a little here, chip a little there, and before they knew it, they'd see a black rubbish bag.

Barry had diagrammed the gravel floor of the garage and marked the exact position of the grave. He had drawn a map of West Park, with a line showing the way from the tennis courts to the creek.

The bike trail was deserted—and with good reason. It was after eleven, Saturday night. The air was muggy, and by the time they reached the footpath they were breathing heavily and sweating.

Leo was in charge of this expedition, and he carried the flashlight. Ionucci followed, head down, breathing hard, mad at the world for being here. They were dressed in solid black. 'Careful,' Leo said as they slid down the creek bank and climbed up the other side. They were not exactly woodsy types. The Bull expected at any moment to step on a thick, squirming snake.

The flashlight was turned off, and they crouched low through the undergrowth until they were behind Clifford's chainlink fence. They rested on their knees.

'This is stupid, you know,' Ionucci said between loud breaths. 'Since when do we dig up bodies?'

Leo was surveying the darkness of Clifford's back garden. Not a single light. 'Shut up,' he said without moving his head.

'Yeah, yeah,' Ionucci mumbled. 'It's stupid.' His screaming lungs were almost audible. Sweat dripped from his chin.

'Let's go,' Leo said. They scooted across the grass to the gate in Clifford's fence, then through it. They darted between the trees until they landed on all fours by the rear wall of the garage.

Leo stood and tried to open the door. It was locked. Ionucci produced a hammer from a pouch on his waist, and Leo tapped lightly on the dirty pane just above the doorknob. 'Watch that corner,' he said to the Bull, who crawled behind him and looked in the direction of the Ballantine home next door.

Leo pecked and pecked until the pane broke. He carefully removed the jagged pieces of glass, slid his arm through and unlocked the door. He turned on the flashlight and the three eased inside.

The boat was in the centre of the garage. It was a sixteen-foot outboard ski rig resting on a trailer. Layers of junk were piled round it—garden tools, sacks of aluminium cans, stacks of newspapers, rusted patio furniture.

Leo aimed the small light at a point directly under the main beam of the trailer. He motioned for the Bull, who began brushing away the

white gravel. From the waist pouch, Ionucci produced a small trowel. The Bull took it and scraped away more gravel.

Two inches down, the scraping sound changed when he struck concrete. The boat was in the way. The Bull stood, slowly lifted the hitch and, with a mighty strain, rolled the front of the trailer five feet to the side. The edge of the trailer brushed against the aluminium cans and there was a prolonged racket. The men froze.

'You gotta be careful,' Leo whispered. 'Stay here and don't move.' He left them standing in the dark beside the boat and eased through the rear door. He stood beside a tree behind the garage and watched the house next door. It was dark and quiet. He crept back inside the garage and aimed the flashlight at the spot of concrete under the gravel. 'Let's clear it off,' he said, and the Bull returned to his knees.

As soon as the entire concrete surface was clear, Ionucci knelt, and he and the Bull began chipping away with chisels and hammers. Leo placed the flashlight on the gravel beside them and eased again through the rear door. He moved quickly to the rear of the house. The sounds were barely audible.

He darted back to the garage and sat in the darkness between a corner and the Spitfire. Through the hedge he could see the outline of the neighbour's house. Nothing moved. The only sounds were the muffled chipping of concrete from the grave of Boyd Boyette.

CLINT'S ACCORD STOPPED near the tennis courts. A red Cadillac was parked on the street. Reggie turned off the lights and the engine. They stared through the windscreen in silence.

Mark hadn't said much since dark. They had napped for an hour after a pizza had been delivered to their motel room. They had watched television. He had asked her repeatedly about the time, as if he had an appointment with a firing squad. At ten she was convinced he would chicken out. But here they were at eleven forty, planning an impossible mission that neither really wanted.

'Do you think anybody knows we're here?' he asked softly.

She looked at him. 'You mean, here in New Orleans?'

'Yeah. Do you think anyone knows we're in New Orleans?'

'No, I don't think so.'

This seemed to satisfy him. They left the car and walked along the bike trail. It was pitch-black and they walked slowly, side by side. She clutched his hand and tried to be brave. Surely, she prayed, something would happen very soon, and they would dash back to the car and leave New Orleans.

A light on a pole revealed the picnic pavilion to their left. The



footpath started to the right. Mark pressed a switch and the beam from a small flashlight hit the ground in front of them. With the light in his hand he moved through the woods faster now, brushing past branches and dodging saplings.

'Slow down, Mark,' Reggie said more than once.

He helped her down the creek bank. They climbed to the other side and found the small trail that ran parallel to the houses. They moved slowly, quietly, and Mark turned off the flashlight.

Then they were in the dense trees directly behind Clifford's house. They knelt and caught their breath. Through the undergrowth they could see the outline of the rear of the garage.

On all fours Mark crawled to the edge of the thick undergrowth. Reggie followed. They stopped twenty feet from the gate, in thick, wet weeds. The garden was dark and still.

'Reggie, I want you to stay here. I'll be back in a minute.'

'No!' she whispered loudly. 'You can't do this, Mark!'

He was already moving. He slid through the grass like a lizard and opened the gate just wide enough to slip through. He stopped behind a tree and listened. *Chink. Chink.* He froze on his hands and knees. The sounds were coming from the garage. *Chink. Chink.* Very slowly he peeked round the tree and stared at the rear door. It was open slightly and a windowpane was missing.

Somebody was in there, with the lights off, digging! He breathed deeply and crawled behind a pile of debris less than ten feet from the rear door. The grass was tall here. He crouched low and started for the garage. The ragged end of a rotten two-by-four caught his ankle. The pile of debris rattled and an empty bucket fell to the ground.

Reggie heard the racket and fell to her stomach in the grass. She closed her eyes and said a prayer.

Leo bounced to his feet and darted to the rear of the garage. He yanked a .38 with a silencer from his waist, then cut round the pile of debris, ready to fire. He squatted and studied the darkness. Nothing moved. Long seconds passed without a sound.

Leo stood upright, moved across the garden, the gun still ready, and leaned against a tree. Less than twelve feet away, Mark crouched on all fours and held his breath.

'What is it?' Ionucci asked. He was standing at the garage door.

'I don't know,' Leo said in a half-whisper. 'Maybe just a cat or something. Get back to work.'

The door closed softly, and Leo paced silently back and forth for five minutes. To Mark it seemed like an hour.

Then the dark figure eased round the corner and was gone. Mark



slowly counted to one hundred, then crawled along the hedgerow to the fence. He paused at the gate and counted to thirty. All was quiet except for the muffled chiselling. Then he darted to the edge of the wood, where Reggie was crouching in absolute terror. She grabbed him and they ducked into the heavier undergrowth.

'They're in there!' he said, out of breath. 'They're digging up the body.'

'What happened?'

He swallowed and tried to speak. 'I tripped on something, and this one guy—he had a gun—almost found me. Was I scared!'

'You're still scared. And so am I. Let's get out of here.'

'Listen, Reggie. Wait a minute. No one can see us here.'

She stared at the garage. 'Mark, these are Muldanno's people. They know you've escaped. They're panicking. They've got guns and who knows what else? It's over. They win. Let's go.'

'We can't let them take the body, Reggie. Think about it. If they get away with it, it'll never be found. We gotta do something.'

'What! You want to pick a fight with armed Mafia thugs?'

'Just wait a minute. I've got an idea. Stay here and don't move.' He crept from the wood, through the grass, to the fence.

Just inside the gate was an abandoned flowerbed covered with weeds. He crawled to it and picked out three rocks. Then he retreated into the darkness to Reggie, and they huddled again.

'Mark, this is insane, son,' she pleaded. 'Please. These people are not playing games.'

'We're safe here, Reggie. Trust me. Stay here.' He pointed to a spot near three trees, about thirty feet away. 'I'll be right back,' he said, and he disappeared.

He crawled through the undergrowth until he was behind the neighbour's house. There was a small patio, dimly lit, and a large plate-glass window that overlooked it. He stood behind a tree and measured the distance. He estimated it to be the length of two house trailers. He took a deep breath and threw a rock as hard as he could.

Leo jumped at the sound from next door. It sounded like a rock landing on wooden decking. He watched for a long time and nothing happened. Another false alarm.

THE NEIGHBOUR, Mr Ballantine, rolled over and stared at the ceiling. He had just dozed off, and was awakened by a sound. Or was it a sound? No place was safe in New Orleans any more, and he'd paid two thousand dollars for an alarm system six months earlier.

He had just closed his eyes again when the window crashed. He

bolted to the bedroom door, turned on the light and shouted, 'Get up, Wanda! Get up!' Wanda reached for her robe, and Mr Ballantine grabbed the shotgun from the closet. The alarm was wailing. They raced down the hall, yelling at each other, flipping on light switches. 'Call the police!' he barked at her. 'Nine one one.'

'I know the number.'

'Hurry up!' Crouching low and aiming the gun, he fought his way to the kitchen where he punched numbers on a control panel—and the sirens stopped.

LEO HAD JUST RESETTLED into his guard post when the crash shattered the stillness. He scrambled to his feet and darted to the hedgerow at the Ballantine property line. A siren screamed briefly, then stopped. A man in a red nightshirt ran onto the patio with a shotgun.

Leo crept quickly to the rear door of the garage. Ionucci and the Bull were crouched in terror beside the boat. Voices could be heard next door.

'What the hell is it?' Ionucci demanded through clenched teeth.

'I don't know,' Leo bristled, inching towards the window facing the Ballantine property. 'Something went through a window, I think. Crazy man's got a shotgun!'

'A what!' Ionucci almost shrieked. He and the Bull joined Leo at the window. The crazy man with the shotgun was stomping round his back garden, yelling at the trees. Mr Ballantine was sick of New Orleans and sick of crime, and he was just so damned sick of it that he raised the shotgun and fired once at the trees for good measure.

The three men in the garage next door hit the dirt. Slowly they raised their heads in unison, and at precisely that instant the first police car pulled into the Ballantine driveway with blue and red lights flashing wildly.

Ionucci was the first one out of the door, followed by the Bull, then Leo. They scooted along close to the ground, dashing from tree to tree, trying to make it to the woods before there was more gunfire.

Mark and Reggie huddled deep in the undergrowth. 'You're crazy,' she kept muttering. She hugged him anyway. They didn't see the three silhouettes scampering along until they crossed through the fence.

'There they are,' Mark whispered, pointing.

'Three of them,' she whispered, her heart pounding. The three leaped into the undergrowth less than twenty feet from where Reggie and Mark were hiding, and disappeared into the woods.

The shotgun blast brought the neighbourhood to life. Floodlights

filled gardens. Men and women in bathrobes walked onto patios. Voices shouted enquiries across fences. Mr Ballantine yelled a lot. Dogs came to life. Mark and Reggie withdrew deeper into the woods.

The cops settled Mr Ballantine down, then walked along the rear fence, searching perhaps for more felonious rocks. It was hopeless. They helped him tape clear plastic over the window. The red and blue lights were turned off, and after twenty minutes the cops left.

Reggie and Mark waited, trembling and holding hands. The mosquitoes were brutal. The weeds and burs stuck to their dark sweatshirts. The lights in the Ballantine house finally went off, and they waited some more.

A FEW MINUTES after one, the clouds broke and the half-moon lightened Romey's back garden and garage for a moment. Reggie had become accustomed to her little spot in the jungle, and though her legs ached from squatting, she was feeling remarkably safe.

Mark swatted and slapped mosquitoes, and said little. He was eerily calm. He chewed on a weed, watched the fence, and acted as if he alone knew precisely when to make the next move.

'I really think we should leave now,' she said.

'I don't think it's a good idea,' he whispered.

'Why?'

'Because those men could still be around here. In fact, they could be close by, waiting for things to settle down so they can return. If we head for the car, we might meet them.'

'Mark, I'm fifty-two years old, and I've had it. I can't take any more of this, OK? Do what you've got to do, because I'm leaving now.' But she didn't move.

The moonlight disappeared, and suddenly the woods were darker. He pointed at the garage as if she didn't know where it was. 'I'm crawling up there with the flashlight, and I'm looking at the body or the grave or whatever they were digging at, OK?'

'I'm going with you,' she said.

'No. I want you to stay here. I'm worried that those guys are watching too, somewhere along the tree line. If they come after me, I want you to start yelling and run like crazy.'

'No. No way, sweetheart. If you're looking at the body, then I'm looking at the body, and that's final.'

He looked at her eyes, four or five inches away, and decided not to argue. Her head was shaking and her jaw was tight.

'Then follow me, Reggie. Stay low and listen, OK?'

They attacked from the undergrowth—on all fours again, sliding in



the still darkness. The grass was wet and cool. The gate was open and they stopped at the first tree. Not a sound from anywhere. They stopped at the next tree, then crawled to the junk pile.

She nodded at Mark, and they darted to the rear door of the garage. Mark stuck his head inside. He turned on the flashlight and aimed it at the floor. Reggie eased in behind him.

The odour was thick and pungent, like a dead animal rotting in the sun. Reggie instinctively covered her nose and mouth. Mark breathed deeply, then held his breath.

The only open space in the cluttered room was in the centre, where the boat had been parked. They crouched over the concrete slab. 'I'm getting sick,' Reggie said, barely opening her mouth.

Another ten minutes and the body would have been out. They had started in the centre, somewhere round the torso, and chipped away to each side. Mark picked up a chisel, one that had been left behind, and jabbed it into black plastic.

'Don't!' Reggie whispered loudly.

He ripped through the rubbish bag, then pulled the plastic with his hand. He bolted upright in horror, then slowly placed the light squarely into the decaying face of the late Senator Boyd Boyette.

Reggie took a step backwards and fell onto a pile of bags filled with aluminium cans. The racket was deafening. She scrambled to get up in the darkness, but the thrashing created more noise. Mark grabbed a hand and pulled her up.

'I'm sorry!' she whispered, standing two feet from the corpse without thinking about it.

'Shhhhh,' Mark said, peeking through the window. A light came on next door. The shotgun could not be far behind.

'Let's go,' he said. 'Stay low.'

They eased through the rear door. Mark hit his hands and knees and slid round the debris pile, past the trees and through the gate. Reggie was on his heels. When they reached the wood, Mark turned on the flashlight and they scampered off. They didn't slow until they were at the creek bed.

THEY ENTERED THE EXPRESSWAY by the Superdome and headed for Metairie. Not a word had been spoken since they'd jumped into the car at West Park and left the area.

'I think we need to talk about your plans now,' she said, glancing at Mark.

'We need to move fast, Reggie. Those guys will be back to get the body, don't you think?'

'I agree. They might be back now, for all we know.'

He gently scratched the bites on his left forearm. 'I've been thinking. There are two things I don't like about Memphis: the heat and the flat land. I've always thought it would be so nice to live in the mountains, where the air is cool and the snow is deep in the wintertime. Wouldn't that be fun?'

She smiled to herself and changed lanes. 'Sounds wonderful. But what happened to the tall buildings and the crowded city?'

'That was yesterday. Today I'm thinking about mountains.'

'Is that where you want to go, Mark?'

'I think so. Out west somewhere. Can I?'

'It can be arranged. Right now they'll agree to almost anything.'

He stopped scratching and locked his fingers round his knees. His voice was tired. 'I can't go back to Memphis, can I?'

'No,' she said softly.

'I didn't think so. But be honest with me, Reggie. Do you think they'll ever find me?'

She had to say no. At this moment he had no choice. They had to call the FBI and either strike a deal or turn themselves in.

'No, Mark, they'll never find you. You have to trust the FBI. Right now they've got the only game in town.'

'I'm all messed up, Reggie,' he said quietly. 'I don't know what happens next any more.' And the tough little boy who threw rocks through windows, outsmarted killers and cops and raced fearlessly through dark woods began to cry.

JO TRUMANN GRABBED the phone and handed it to her husband, who took it and sat in the centre of the bed. 'Hello,' he grunted.

'Hi, Larry. It's me, Reggie Love. Remember?'

'Yeah. Where are you?'

'Here in New Orleans. We've found the body.'

Trumann was suddenly on his feet. 'I'm listening.'

'I've seen the body, Larry. About two hours ago. The people who buried the body tried to retrieve it last night, but they were unable to do so. I'm willing to bet they'll try again very soon.'

'Is the kid with you?'

'Yes. He wants to cut a deal. Meet me in forty-five minutes at the Raintree Inn on Veterans Memorial Boulevard in Metairie. There's a grill that's open all night.'

'Can I bring someone with me?'

'Who?'

'K.O. Lewis.'

'He's in town?'

'Yeah. We knew you were here, so he flew in a few hours ago.'

There was a pause at her end. 'How'd you know I was here?'

'Can I explain it when we meet?' he asked, kicking himself for opening this can of worms.

'Who have you wired, Trumann? Talk to me, or I'm cancelling the meeting right now,' she commanded. She thought about the tape.

'OK,' he said, thinking of the same tape. 'We bugged the kid's mother's room at the hospital. It was a mistake. I didn't do it. Memphis did. Your man Clint called and told her you guys were in New Orleans.'

There was another long pause. 'Just you and K.O. Lewis,' she said. 'No one else. If Foltrigg shows up, all deals are off.'

She hung up. Trumann immediately called K.O. Lewis at the Hilton. Then he called McThune in Memphis.

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, Trumann and Lewis walked nervously into the near-empty Raintree grill. Reggie waited at a table in the corner, sipping black coffee.

'Good morning, Ms Love,' Lewis said as they sat opposite her.

'It's Reggie, OK? Are we alone?'

'Of course,' Lewis said. At that moment eight FBI agents were guarding the parking lot, and more were on the way.

'No bugs, wire, body mikes, salt shakers?'

'None.'

A waiter appeared. 'We're not eating,' Reggie said. She handed Lewis a piece of paper. 'These are the names of three psychiatric hospitals that specialise in children—in Rockford, Tallahassee and Phoenix. Any one will do.'

'But we've already checked with the clinic in Portland,' Lewis said, puzzled.

'I don't care, Mr Lewis. Take the list, call Washington and check again. I suggest you do it quickly. Do it my way and you might get the body before Muldanno carries it away and drops it in the ocean.'

They nodded furiously.

'Did you fly here on a private jet?' she asked Lewis.

'Yes. It's the director's.'

'Good. Send it back to Memphis. Pick up Dianne and Ricky Sway, along with his doctor and Clint. Fly them here immediately. McThune is welcome to come. We'll meet them at the airport and, when Mark is safely on board and the plane is gone, I'll tell you where the body is. How about it so far?'

'No problem,' Lewis said. Trumann was speechless.

'The entire family enters the witness protection plan. They pick the hospital and, when Ricky is able to move, they'll pick the city.'

'No problem.'

'Complete change of identification, nice little house, a car, the works. This woman needs to stay home and raise her kids for a while, so I'd suggest a monthly allowance of four thousand dollars for three years. Plus an initial twenty-five thousand. Remember, they lost everything in the fire. There are a couple of other minor matters and they'll be covered in the agreement.'

'What agreement?'

'The agreement Clint is typing as we speak. It'll be signed by myself, Dianne Sway, Judge Harry Roosevelt and you, Mr Lewis, on behalf of Director Voyles.'

'What else is in the agreement?' Lewis asked.

'I want your assurance that you'll do everything in your power to compel the attendance of Roy Foltrigg before the juvenile court of Shelby County, Tennessee. Judge Roosevelt will want to discuss a few matters with him, and I'm sure Foltrigg will resist. If a subpoena is issued for him, I want it served by you, Mr Trumann.'

'Gladly,' Trumann said with a nasty smile.

'Good. Go make your phone calls. Tell McThune to get that bug off Dianne's phone. I need to talk to her. We'll meet back here.'

'No problem.' They jumped to their feet.

AT FIVE FORTY, Trumann returned alone to the table where Reggie waited. He brought two cellular phones. 'Thought we might need these,' he said.

'Where'd you get them?' Reggie asked.

'They were delivered to us here.'

'By some of your men?'

'That's right.'

'Just for fun, how many men do you have right now within a quarter of a mile of this place?'

'I don't know. Twelve or thirteen. It's routine, Reggie. They might be needed. We'll send a few to protect the kid, if you'll tell me where he is. I assume he's alone.'

'He's alone, and he's fine. Did you talk to McThune?'

'Yes. They've already picked up Clint.'

One of the phones rang and Trumann grabbed it. K.O. Lewis hurried to the table and brought his own cellular phone. He jumped into his chair and leaned across the table. 'Talked to Washington.

We're checking the hospitals right now. Everything looks fine.'

'How about the plane?'

'It's leaving now, should be in Memphis by six thirty.'

Trumann placed a hand over his phone. 'This is McThune. He's at the hospital, waiting for Dr Greenway and Judge Roosevelt.'

'Have you debugged Dianne's phone?' Reggie asked.

'Yes.'

'Good. Tell him to call back in twenty minutes,' she said.

Trumann mumbled into the phone and flipped a switch. Within seconds K.O.'s phone beeped. He stuck it to his head and broke into a smile. 'Yes, sir,' he said respectfully. 'Just a second.' He jabbed the phone at Reggie. 'It's Director Voyles. He'd like to speak with you.'

Reggie took it. 'This is Reggie Love.'

A deep and very clear voice came from the other end. 'Ms Love, this is Denton Voyles. How are you?'

'Just fine. The name's Reggie, OK?'

'Sure, Reggie. Listen, I just wanted to assure you the FBI will do anything you want to protect this kid and his family. K.O. has full authority to act for me. We'll also protect you, if you wish.'

'I'm more concerned about the child, Denton.'

Trumann and Lewis glanced at each other. She had just called him Denton, a feat no one had dared before.

'If you want, you can fax me the agreement here and I'll sign it myself,' he said.

'That won't be necessary, but thanks.'

'Good luck to you, Reggie. You guys work out the details. Call me if you need me. I'll be at the office all day.'

'Thank you,' she said, and handed the phone back to Lewis.

'Look, Reggie, could you give us an idea how long it'll take to get to the body?' Trumann asked cautiously. He didn't want to press or to upset her, but he needed to start planning.

'If you don't get lost, you should find it in fifteen minutes.'

'Fifteen minutes,' he repeated slowly.



Clint hadn't smoked in four years, but he found himself puffing nervously on a Virginia Slim. Dianne had one too, and they stood at the end of the hall and watched as the day broke over downtown Memphis. Both had talked to Reggie in the past thirty minutes.

'The director of the FBI has given his word,' Clint said, sucking



hard on the narrow cigarette. 'There's no other choice, Dianne.'

'We just leave, right? We just get on the plane and fly off into the sunset, and everybody lives happily ever after?'

'Something like that.'

'What if I don't want to, Clint?'

'You can't say no. Your son has made the decision to talk.'

'Ms Sway?' a heavy voice said from behind. They turned to find the Honourable Harry M. Roosevelt standing behind them in a bright blue jogging suit. He was holding the agreement Clint had typed.

She acknowledged his presence, but said nothing.

'I just talked to Reggie,' he said to Dianne. 'I've read this agreement and I'm inclined to sign it. I think it's in the best interests of Mark for you to do the same.'

'And if I don't?'

'Then Mark will be returned here, placed back in detention and beyond that, who knows. The situation is much more urgent now, since we now know for a fact that Mark knows where the body is. He could be in great danger. You're at the point, Ms Sway, where you have to trust people.'

Dianne slowly took the agreement from His Honour. 'Let's go talk to Dr Greenway.'

They followed her down the hall to the room next to Ricky's.

Twenty minutes later the door to room 943 opened, and little Ricky Sway was wheeled into the hallway on a stretcher pushed by Jason McThune and Clint Van Hooser. A helicopter was waiting on the roof. At Memphis International Airport a half-dozen FBI agents guarded the pad as Ricky was rolled to a nearby jet.

AT TEN MINUTES BEFORE SEVEN a cellular phone rang at the corner table of the Raintree grill, and Trumann grabbed it. He listened, then set the phone down. 'They're in the air,' he announced.

Reggie breathed deeply and smiled at him. 'The body's in concrete. You'll need a few hammers and chisels.'

Trumann choked on his orange juice. 'OK. Anything else?'

'I'll be back in a minute.' Reggie walked to the registration desk and asked the clerk to check the fax machine. The clerk returned with a copy of the agreement, which Reggie read closely. It was perfect. She returned to the table. 'Let's get Mark,' she said.

MARK FINISHED BRUSHING his teeth and sat on the edge of the bed. He heard a car door, then footsteps, then a knock. 'Mark, it's me,' Reggie said. He opened the door but she did not step inside.

‘Are you ready to go?’ she asked.

‘I guess.’ He stepped out into the parking lot. Three cars were waiting. A man opened the rear door of the middle car and Mark and his attorney got in. The little motorcade sped away.

‘Everything’s fine,’ Reggie said. ‘Ricky and your mother are on the plane. They’ll be here in about an hour. Are you OK?’

‘I guess. Are all these guys FBI agents?’

She nodded and patted his hand, and he suddenly felt important—sitting in the rear of his own black car, being rushed to the airport to board a private jet, cops all around just to protect him. He crossed his legs and sat a bit straighter.

He’d never flown before.

BARRY PACED NERVOUSLY in Johnny Sulari’s office. His nasty eyes were red, but not from partying. He hadn’t slept. He’d waited here at the warehouse for the body to be delivered to him, and when Leo and company arrived, around one, without it, he had called his uncle.

The screaming had ended hours ago. Barry had cursed Leo, Ionucci and the Bull, and Leo had cursed back. But with time the panic subsided. Johnny decided to wait twenty-four hours and try again.

THE HANGAR WAS a quarter-mile from the main terminal, in a row of identical grey buildings. The words GULF AIR were painted in orange letters above the tall double doors, which were opening as the three cars stopped in front of the hangar.

With the doors out of the way, the entire front of the hangar was now open. Three men walked hurriedly along the back wall as if searching for something. Two more stood by one door. Outside, another half-dozen moved slowly about, keeping their distance.

‘How much longer, do you think?’ Reggie asked Trumann.

He glanced at his watch. ‘Probably thirty minutes.’

‘Let’s walk around,’ she said, opening her door. As if on cue, the other eleven doors in the little parade opened, and the cars emptied. Mark looked around. This had become terribly exciting. If the kids at school could only see him now. He followed Reggie into the vast hangar where two private jets, one black, the other silver, caught his attention. He stared at them.

Larry Trumann knelt beside him. ‘Mark, do you remember me?’ he asked with a smile.

‘Yes, sir. I met you at the hospital.’

‘That’s right. My name’s Larry Trumann.’ He offered his hand and Mark shook it slowly. He kept staring at the jets.

'Would you like to look at them?' Trumann asked.

'Can I?' he asked.

'Sure.' Trumann stood and placed a hand on Mark's shoulder. They walked across the gleaming concrete to the black jet.

Reggie and K.O. Lewis watched as Trumann lowered the steps and he and Mark disappeared inside the plane.

'He's a brave kid,' Lewis said.

'He's remarkable,' Reggie said. 'At times he thinks like a terrorist; then he cries like a little child.'

'He is a child.'

'I know. But don't tell him. It may upset him, and who knows what he might do?'

'We've pulled some strings. There's a room waiting for Ricky at the clinic in Phoenix. We need to know if that's the destination. The pilot has to file a flight plan.'

'Phoenix it is. Complete confidentiality, OK? After that, Mark says he wants to live in the mountains.'

'No problem,' Lewis said. 'I must confess, Reggie, I was never convinced the kid knew.'

'Clifford told him everything. He knew exactly where it was.'

'Why'd you come here? Seems awfully risky.'

'You'll have to ask him. He insisted we find the body. If Clifford lied to him, then he figured he was off the hook.'

Mark's small head was now in the cockpit, and Reggie half expected the engines to start, the plane to taxi onto the runway and Mark to dazzle them with a perfect takeoff. She knew he could do it.

'Are you concerned about your own safety?' Lewis asked.

'Not really. What would they gain by coming after me?'

'Retribution. Director Voyles would like us to stick close for a few months, at least until the trial is over.'

'I don't care what you do. I just don't want to see anyone who's watching me, OK?'

An agent with a radio walked up to them and said, 'They're on final approach.' They followed him to the opening of the hangar, near the cars. A minute later Mark and Trumann joined them and, as they watched the sky to the north, a tiny plane appeared.

'That's them,' Lewis said. Mark inched his way next to Reggie and took her hand. The plane grew larger as it approached the runway. It, too, was black, but much larger than the jets in the hangar. Agents began moving around as the plane taxied to them and stopped. The door opened and the steps hit the ground.

Jason McThune trotted down first. Dianne and Clint were next,

and together the three walked briskly towards the hangar.

Mark released Reggie's hand and ran to meet his mother. Dianne grabbed and hugged him, and for an awkward second or two everyone else watched or looked at the terminal in the distance.

REGGIE LED DIANNE and Mark into a small office while Trumann, McThune and Lewis waited nervously outside. It was now twenty minutes before eight. What if they changed their minds? What if Muldanno got the body?

Inside, Mark sat on his mother's lap. Reggie sat at the desk and Clint stood by the door.

'I'm glad you came,' Reggie said to Dianne.

'I didn't have much of a choice.' She stroked Mark's hair.

'I understand,' Reggie said. 'But we can't stop things. How's Ricky?'

'About the same. They had to drug him slightly when we left the hospital, but Dr Greenway is trying to bring him round so he can enjoy the plane ride.'

'The FBI has contacted a children's psychiatric hospital in Phoenix, and they're waiting for you now. Clint checked it out. It's been highly recommended.'

'So we're going to live in Phoenix?' Dianne asked.

'Only until Ricky is released. Then you go wherever you want.'

The office was silent for a long time. Reggie had nothing else to say. Dianne's mind was moving clearly now, for the first time in a week. Frightened as she was, she had escaped the dungeon at St Peter's. She was holding her lost son, and the other one would improve. All these people were trying to help. The lamp factory was history. No more cheap trailers. No more worries about bills. She could watch the boys grow up. She could buy some clothes. Good gosh, with a little effort she could be attractive again. As dark as the future seemed, it could not be as horrible as the past six days.

'I guess we'd better get to Phoenix,' she said.

Reggie grinned with relief. She pulled the agreement from a briefcase Clint had brought with him. It had been signed by Harry and McThune. Reggie added her signature and handed the pen to Dianne. Mark, now bored with hugs and tears, walked to the wall and admired a series of framed colour photos of jets.

Reggie took the agreement. 'I'll be back in a minute,' she said, opening the door and closing it behind her.

Trumann jumped when it opened. 'Relax, Larry,' Reggie said. 'Everything's fine. Sign here.' She stuck the agreement in his face and Trumann scrawled his name. K.O. did the same.

'Get the plane ready,' Reggie said. 'They're going to Phoenix.'

McThune jogged towards the agents at the hangar entry with instructions, and Reggie returned to the office. Trumann shook hands and smiled goofily.

McThune walked back to Trumann and handed him an envelope. 'It's a subpoena for Roy Foltrigg,' he said with a smile. 'Judge Roosevelt issued it this morning.'

'On Sunday morning?'

'Yeah. He called his clerk and they met at his office. He's very excited about seeing Foltrigg back in Memphis.'

The three chuckled. 'It'll be served this morning,' Trumann said.

After a minute the office door opened. Clint, Dianne, Mark, then Reggie filed out and headed for the tarmac. Trumann and Lewis escorted them to the hangar doors, and stopped.

K.O., ever the diplomat, offered his hand to Dianne and said, 'Good luck, Ms Sway. Jason McThune will escort you to Phoenix. You are completely safe. And if we can do anything to help, please let us know.'

Dianne gave a sweet smile and shook his hand. Mark offered his and said, 'Thanks, K.O. You've been a real pain.' He was smiling.

K.O. laughed. 'Good luck to you, Mark, and I assure you, son, you've been a bigger pain.'

'Yeah, I know. Sorry about all this.' He shook hands with Trumann and walked away with his mother and McThune. Reggie and Clint remained by the hangar door.

About halfway to the jet, Mark stopped. He watched Dianne board the plane. At no time during the past twenty-four hours had it occurred to him that Reggie would be left behind. He had simply assumed that she would fly off with them and hang around until they were safe. And as he stood there, a tiny figure on the vast tarmac, motionless and stunned, he realised she was not beside him. She was back there with Clint and the FBI.

He turned slowly and stared at her in terror as this sank in. Reggie left her small group and walked to him. She knelt on the tarmac and looked into his panicked eyes.

He bit his lip. 'You can't come with us, can you?' he asked in a frightened voice.

She shook her head as her eyes watered.

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. 'But I want you to go,' he said.

'I can't, Mark.' She leaned forward, took both of his shoulders and hugged him gently. 'I can't go.'



Tears flooded his cheeks. 'I'm sorry about all this. You didn't deserve it.'

'But if it hadn't happened, Mark, I never would've met you.' She kissed him on the cheek and held his shoulders tight. 'I love you, Mark. I'll miss you.'

'I'll never see you again, will I?' His lip quivered and tears dripped off his chin. His voice was frail.

She gritted her teeth and shook her head. 'No, Mark.'

Reggie took a deep breath, and stood. She wanted to grab him and take him home to Momma Love. Instead, she nodded at the plane where Dianne was standing in the doorway, waiting patiently.

Mark wiped his cheeks. He turned and made a feeble attempt to straighten his shoulders, but he couldn't. He walked slowly to the steps and glanced back for one last look.

MINUTES LATER, as the plane taxied to the end of the runway, Clint eased to her side and took her hand. They watched silently as the plane took off and finally disappeared into the clouds.

'He's quite a kid,' Clint said.

'It hurts, Clint.'

He squeezed her hand. 'I know.'

Trumann appeared quietly beside them. She noticed him and pulled the cassette tape from her pocket. 'It's yours,' she said. He took it.

'The body is in the garage behind Jerome Clifford's house,' she said. 'Eight eighty-six East Brookline.'

Trumann turned to his left and stuck a radio to his mouth. The agents bolted for their cars. Reggie and Clint did not move.

'Thanks, Reggie,' Trumann said, suddenly anxious to leave.

She nodded at the distant clouds. 'Don't thank me,' she said. 'Thank Mark.'

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## JOHN GRISHAM

Fans of John Grisham's legal thrillers won't be surprised to learn that *The Client* went straight into the top ten on the best-seller charts the instant it was published. After all, the lawyer-turned-novelist is currently something of a publishing sensation. His earlier novels *The Firm* and *The Pelican Brief* established John Grisham as the most successful writer to appear this decade, with more than twenty million copies of his books in print. 'It's been almost a thrill a minute,' Grisham says. 'Most of it is still unbelievable.'

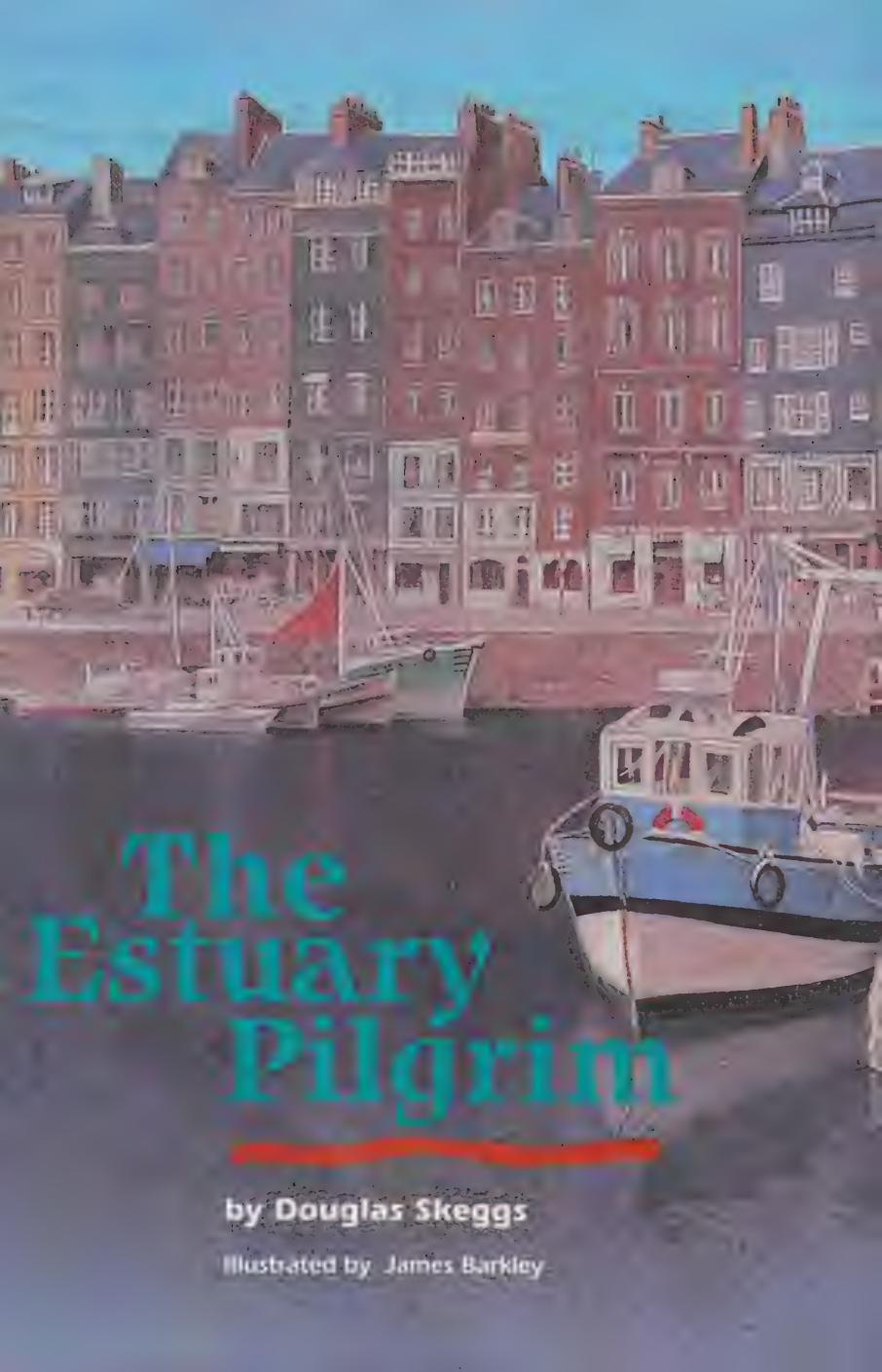
Despite his meteoric rise to the top, John Grisham has kept his feet planted firmly on the ground. He still coaches his son's Little League baseball team and remains an active member of the First Baptist Church in Oxford, Mississippi. Recently he went with twenty-three fellow members to a remote village in Brazil to help build a church there.

Grisham has few regrets that he has changed careers, choosing writing over his earlier legal profession, claiming that he's 'thrilled to be out of it'. Even so, he's discovered that literary fame can be a mixed blessing. 'We're still getting used to the lack of privacy,' he says. But for the moment at least, all is right in John Grisham's world. 'Ten years from now,' he says, 'I plan to be sitting here looking out over my land. I hope I'll be writing books, but if not, I'll be on my pond, fishing with my kids.'

A well-earned future for a modern phenomenon.

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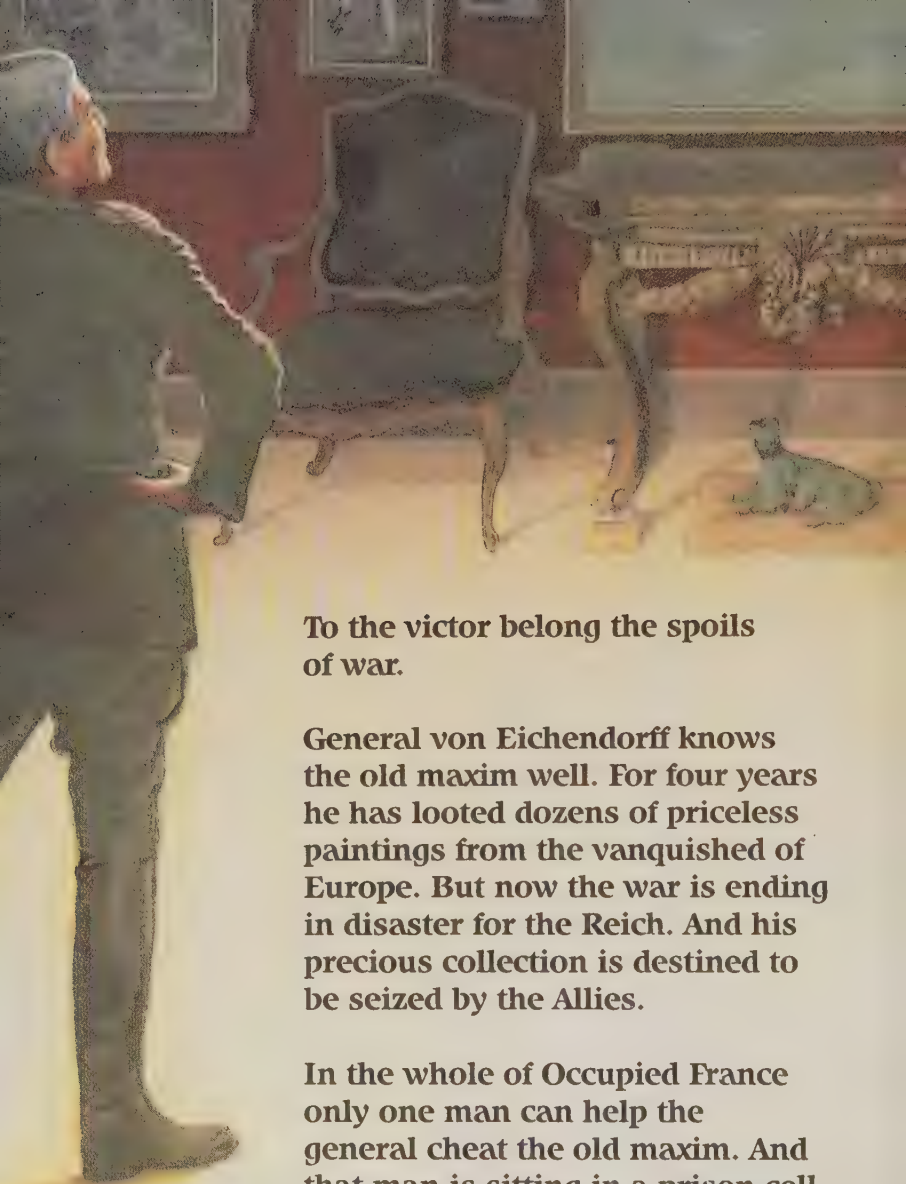
# The Estuary Pilgrim

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by Douglas Skeggs

Illustrated by James Barkley





**To the victor belong the spoils  
of war.**

**General von Eichendorff knows  
the old maxim well. For four years  
he has looted dozens of priceless  
paintings from the vanquished of  
Europe. But now the war is ending  
in disaster for the Reich. And his  
precious collection is destined to  
be seized by the Allies.**

**In the whole of Occupied France  
only one man can help the  
general cheat the old maxim. And  
that man is sitting in a prison cell,  
condemned to death.**



# Prologue

## Honfleur, France, May 1944

Captain Rupert Ashford stood at the window of his cell and watched the preparations for his execution.

It was dawn on May 6, 1944; the bell tower of Sainte Catherine's had just tolled six. The yard below him was dreary with shadow, the cold morning light forbidding any colour more cheerful than slate grey.

The Opel truck lumbered across the cobbles, jolting on the uneven surface, and drew to a halt against the far wall. A corporal jumped from the cab and walked back towards the rear end. Banging the wooden side with his hand, he barked out a single order. The tail flap clanged down and a handful of soldiers shuffled out, the hobnails of their boots rasping on the stone. Their faces were lean and unshaven, strangely anonymous, with windburnt skin and eyes invisible beneath the flanges of their steel helmets. Ashford could see that their uniforms were baggy at the knees, the leather of their gun belts soft and faded from constant wear; four years of fighting had certainly tarnished the spit and polish of the German Wehrmacht.

At the far side of the yard an Oberleutnant stood waiting with hands on his hips as the corporal formed his men up.

Ashford knew what lay in store for him.

Two days earlier he had watched the same firing squad execute a group of civilians. Dazed and uncomprehending, the condemned men had been herded up against the wall, their heads hanging, hands thrust deep in their pockets. The ragged volley of gunfire had hardly stirred them; they'd stumbled into one another and crumpled to the

ground. As soon as the squad had fired, they'd moved forward, hefted the bodies into the back of the lorry and driven away.

The whole episode had lasted less than ten minutes.

Pressing his forehead against the iron bar of the window, Ashford closed his eyes. He felt sick and giddy. For three days he had been locked in this cell, without sleep or food. Blue-black bruises distorted one side of his face, puffing up the flesh; two ribs were broken, and his whole body ached from the relentless beating it had taken.

A major of the Waffen SS had conducted the interrogations. His manner had been quiet and reasonable. He wanted to know the names of Ashford's contacts in the Maquis, the code words, the targets they had planned.

Ashford had said nothing. He had his reasons for keeping silent, and they gave him the strength to survive. The major had shaken his head sadly at the end of each session and withdrawn. In his place had come Kleber, a professional torturer from the Gestapo. Kleber had gone about his business deliberately, his shaved head glistening like a billiard ball in the dark cell. The only instrument he'd employed in his work was a kitchen pestle, a marble head set on a short wooden handle. It was designed to grind up herbs and spices, but Kleber used it to pulverise the soft tissue of Ashford's body.

Now there were footsteps in the passage. Ashford clambered down from the window. It didn't do to show he'd been watching.

The bolts were thrown back, the cell door kicked open, and two soldiers moved in. Grabbing their prisoner roughly by the arms and the scruff of his collar, they frog-marched him out into the passage, jolting him off-balance so that his feet dragged along the bare wooden boards. When they reached the ground floor, he was pushed outside. Ashford walked a few paces and then paused. A terrible silence had settled in the yard.

The Oberleutnant drew his pistol from its holster and signalled the prisoner forward into the arena.

Slowly and painfully Ashford stumbled towards him. In the middle of the yard he was given the order to halt. The corporal stepped forward, handcuffed Ashford's arms behind his back and turned him round to face the firing squad.

They looked very young for executioners; some of them could have been no more than nineteen. He too had been young when he'd first enlisted, Ashford reflected. When war broke out, he'd been on his way up to Cambridge to study law, a glittering future before him. But everything had changed since then: the hopes, ambitions, even the morals he'd held in such high esteem, had all died and rotted away.

Two years in the desert, another in occupied France had aged him, brutalising his personality. The glow of youth had been buried beneath the hard shell of the professional soldier.

An order broke the silence. The rifles were raised.

Ashford looked at the sky. The mist was parting, the morning light beginning to melt away the layer of low cloud. He could hear the seagulls squabbling above the harbour, and he could smell the sea.

The bolts clattered back; the cartridges were inserted into the rifle breeches and driven home. Ashford could see the snouts of the barrels as they aimed at him, the raised hand of the corporal.

Lifting his face towards the sky once more, he held it there, and then, with a sigh of resignation, his shoulders slumped, his head rolled forward onto his chest. 'I'll talk,' he muttered.

For one sickening moment he thought he'd left it too late.

The Oberleutnant stared at him in silence. Then, with a little sneer of disgust, he put his gun back into the leather holster, turned on his heel and said, 'Take him away.'

'I WILL SPEAK to General von Eichendorff.'

'It is not for you to dictate terms,' replied the major sharply. 'The general does not conduct interviews with spies.'

'He will when he discovers what I have to offer.'

The major stared at Ashford in silence. He was a humourless-looking man, thin-lipped and sallow.

'What is the nature of your information?' he asked softly.

'It concerns the invasion of France,' replied Ashford, mumbling out the words through cracked lips. 'I know where it will take place.'

'In that case you may speak freely to me,' replied the major. 'I will convey the information to the general.'

'No,' whispered Ashford, leaning back against the wall of the cell. 'What I have is for the general's ears only.'

Ashford glanced up at the major as he spoke; he could see the suspicion in the pale Prussian eyes and read the thoughts that passed behind them.

The major came to a decision.

Turning to the two soldiers standing beside him, he rapped out instructions and left the cell, pausing briefly at the door to say, 'I trust, for your sake, Captain, that you are not wasting our time.'

As soon as he was gone, the soldiers relaxed, easing the slings of their rifles. Ashford sat huddled on the wooden bed, his mind preoccupied with the coming meeting. He had no doubt that von Eichendorff would see him. The bait had been taken.

‘On your feet!’ ordered the major when he returned to the cell. The decisions were over; he had been given his orders.

Ashford was marched out into the narrow streets of Honfleur. The two guards urged him along, driving him forward with the butts of their rifles. Their footsteps rang loudly on the cobbles. Medieval buildings leaned over them, their ragged gables closing out the sky.

General von Eichendorff’s headquarters were in the Hôtel de Ville. Two sentries stood guard at the top of a graceful staircase. They opened the double doors and propelled Ashford inside.

The room was well proportioned and superbly furnished. High windows had been thrown open, and the morning sunlight bloomed on the ormolu, rosewood and polished parquet flooring. Above the fireplace was an enormous oil painting, radiant in a carved gilt frame, while other smaller canvases were arranged around it.

An adjutant, a little bureaucrat in spectacles, looked Ashford over with distaste. He pointed to a chair in the centre of the room. ‘Put him over there,’ he instructed.

The two guards thrust him down in the chair and strapped his arms along the rests with a pair of standard-issue military belts, drawing them tight around his wrists. As soon as the prisoner was secure, the adjutant crossed the room and knocked discreetly at an inner door.

As General von Eichendorff walked into the room Ashford felt the nerves in the pit of his stomach begin to flutter. This was the moment he had been anticipating for so long, for which he had survived three days of torture.

Von Eichendorff was a slight figure, with a statesman’s features and silver-grey hair shaved so short that he appeared almost bald. His manner was calm, but it carried the unspoken assumption of power. It was in the set of his head, the thrust of his jaw and the unwavering gaze of the pale sapphire eyes.

He didn’t seem to notice Ashford as he came in. He sat down behind the desk and for ten minutes occupied himself with the morning’s business, scanning the printed sheets that had been laid out ready for his attention. The adjutant hovered at his shoulder all the while, retrieving each document as it was read, indicating where signatures were required and answers needed.

Ashford let his eyes wander up to the huge painting above the mantelpiece. It was rich and warm, saturated in afternoon sunlight. He had no idea who’d painted it, but he recognised the subject well enough: it was the harbour outside. Fishing boats with patched sails and fat-bellied hulls bobbed on bright water.

As he was looking up at the picture Ashford’s right eye darkened,

the lid fluttered, and the colours swam before him. This had happened several times before—Kleber's marble truncheon had damaged his optic nerve. Ashford knew that it was only a matter of time before the eye was blinded for ever.

'You are a very tiresome young man, Captain Ashford,' the general said suddenly, without looking up from his desk. 'My officers tell me that you have caused them considerable inconvenience in the last few days, but that now you wish to make a confession.'

'I must speak with you,' agreed Ashford, turning to face him. 'But alone. The guards must leave.'

Von Eichendorff considered the request. 'Very well.' He nodded towards the two guards, who at once crashed into a salute and withdrew. 'Does that satisfy you now, Captain?'

Ashford looked at the adjutant, but the general shook his head.

'He stays here.'

The adjutant went to his desk at the far side of the room and began sorting through paperwork.

'He won't hear you,' the general continued. 'He has been well trained; he only listens to what I tell him.'

'I'll take your word for it.'

Von Eichendorff leaned back in his seat, meshed his fingers together with the thumbs steepled against his tunic and considered Ashford for a moment. 'Major Mueller tells me that you have information on the planned invasion of France.'

'That's what I told him. It's quite untrue. I know absolutely nothing about any plans.'

The general stiffened. 'So what is it that you want?'

For the first time in three days Ashford smiled. 'I've come to tell you that the war is over, General.'

If von Eichendorff was surprised by this reply, he didn't allow it to show on his face. Leaning forward, he picked up an identity book and showed it to Ashford. 'May I remind you, Captain, that you have not come here, as you put it, of your own free will. You were arrested in the street for carrying forged papers.'

'They were the worst forgery I could find at the time,' Ashford replied simply. 'A child of five, with a potato and a bottle of ink, could have done a better job.'

'I cannot accept that you intended to be arrested.'

'Not only did I intend to be, I went to great lengths to ensure it. I was even carrying English cigarettes at the time.'

Von Eichendorff tossed the identity papers back onto the desk.

'You wish me to believe that you were arrested simply to contrive a



meeting with me this morning? I would be intrigued to know what prompted such an elaborate charade, Captain.'

'The invasion is coming,' Ashford said with studied emphasis. 'I have no idea where or when, but I do know that there will be no stopping them once they land. The war is over for you, General. In a few months, a year at the most, you will be on the run.'

'And why should that concern you?' von Eichendorff asked.

'You are a rich man; your paintings alone are said to be one of the most valuable private collections in the world.' As he spoke, Ashford looked up at the vast painting of Honfleur. 'I've heard that even Goering is jealous of the treasures you've looted.'

'They were not looted.' An edge came into the general's voice. He opened a chased silver box, took out a cigarette. 'Every painting you see on that wall was bought from its original owner. They are mine—I have the receipts to prove it.'

'It will not make the slightest difference. You are still going to lose them,' replied Ashford. 'That is, unless I help you.'

Von Eichendorff paused in the act of lighting his cigarette and said, 'And why would you wish to do that?'

Ashford smiled, and for a moment his eyes blazed, like ice crystals when they are first struck by the morning sun. 'For the money you're going to pay me to hide them,' he replied.

## Chapter One

### Paris, July 1988

The squad car drew to a halt, the bumper almost touching the ground as it braked. John Napier stepped out of the back seat onto the fantailed cobbles and looked up at the building.

It was tall and impassive, a severe neoclassical façade. The windows were uncurtained, the honey-coloured stone sculpted and brushed with blue shadows. Two sentries in pillbox hats stood on either side of the wrought-iron gates, arms resting on the breechblocks of their machine pistols, bored and lethargic in the afternoon heat.

Napier looked at the Tricolor that hung limp as washing above the doorway and wondered what it was that the French government wanted with an art historian such as himself.

Running up the stone steps of the building, he went inside. It was suddenly dark and silent after the brightness of the July sunshine, and the coolness of shaded marble embraced him.

PICARD STOOD at the window above.

On the leather-topped desk beside him lay three reports. The first was from the gendarmerie in the village of Criquetot, Normandy. The next was a terse account taken down verbally from the foreman of a demolition site in the same town. The last report was from the commanding officer of a bomb-disposal squad, registering the discovery of a wartime device that had turned out to be harmless.

Picard had read through each report several times, visualising the scene they described. It was not much to go on, just a beginning. The rest he would learn from this Englishman in the pale striped suit who ran up the steps as though he owned the place.

Picard sat down, rearranging the reports on his desk. After a few minutes his secretary gave a brief knock and came in.

'Dr John Napier,' she announced, holding open the door.

Napier was twenty years younger than Picard had expected. Slim and neatly dressed, he moved across the floor with an easy grace. Only his eyes were rapid, glancing round the office, taking in the details, calculating where he had been brought.

'Dr Napier,' Picard murmured, hurrying out to meet him, 'how very good of you to come at such short notice. My name's Picard . . . Charles Picard.' They shook hands, and he retreated back behind his desk again. 'I trust the officers we sent were not too abrupt.'

'No more than any other press gang.'

Picard had the decency to wince. 'I assure you that we don't usually use such heavy-handed tactics,' he murmured. 'Unfortunately, we had no alternative. We heard that you were about to leave Paris.'

'I was thinking of going up to Normandy for a few days.'

'Research?'

'Seafood.' The walnut-brown eyes narrowed as he spoke, creasing into a smile that was at once engaging.

'An excellent reason,' Picard agreed smoothly, leaning back in his chair, studying Napier with interest.

He was in his early thirties, with a controlled, well-mannered confidence. There was an air of prosperity about him, of ambition tempered with success. His features were strong and faintly aquiline, dark brown hair brushed back from a high forehead, the set of his mouth carving fine creases into his cheeks. They said he was an expert, the best in his field. That remained to be seen.

'Let me explain why you are here.' Picard spread his fine white hands. 'In the last few days an interesting problem has arisen—one that is more in your field than ours. We were hoping that you might be able to lend us your professional advice.'

‘What sort of advice do you have in mind?’

It took a few moments for Picard to answer. He stared out of the window, collecting his thoughts. Then, turning back to the room, he said, ‘Tell me about *The Estuary Pilgrim*.’

At the mention of this name Napier lifted his eyebrows.

‘*The Estuary Pilgrim*.’ His voice softened, caressing the syllables as he spoke them. ‘What do you want to know about it?’

‘Everything you have,’ replied Picard. ‘You are, I believe, an expert on the subject.’

A slight smile curved Napier’s lips. ‘It’s the name of a painting that was destroyed during the war. An extremely important work, one of the first major paintings by Monet.’

‘And how was it destroyed?’ Picard asked.

‘It was part of the von Eichendorff collection,’ Napier explained. ‘He was a German general serving on Rommel’s staff in northern France, but he’s best remembered today for the massive collection of paintings that he hoarded.’

‘You say hoarded. Did he buy these pictures or steal them?’

Napier latched a thumb into his waistcoat pocket and thought for a moment. ‘I don’t know, to be honest. Some claim that the general paid for the paintings; others think he just pinched them.’

‘And *The Estuary Pilgrim*—where did that come from?’

‘A family in Le Havre. They ran a shipping business on the north coast. The painting used to hang in their head office.’

‘From where the general removed it. But you say it’s been lost?’

Napier nodded. ‘In the spring of nineteen forty-four von Eichendorff had his pictures shipped back to Germany by road. The convoy was ambushed by the Resistance about thirty miles inland. The road was mined, and the entire collection burnt in the attack.’

‘Is it possible that *The Estuary Pilgrim* could have survived this ambush?’ Picard asked softly.

‘It’s possible,’ replied Napier, ‘but not very likely.’ He glanced across the desk, suddenly alert. ‘Why do you ask?’

A smile of seraphic innocence washed over Picard’s face.

‘Because we have it downstairs.’

‘IT WAS FOUND in Criquetot,’ said Picard as he led the way down to the basement. ‘It’s a small town in Normandy, about five kilometres from where the convoy you were speaking of was ambushed. The canvas was rolled up and sealed into a steel canister.’

He pushed through a pair of swinging doors and held them open for Napier. The vaulted brick passageway before them was long and

ill lit, and the walls were painted in the dull yellow of leftover custard. They were joined by a security guard, self-important in a blue serge uniform and peaked hat, who led the way.

'The painting came to light quite by chance,' Picard continued. 'Demolition workers were knocking down some old buildings to make way for a new car park. A wall fell, and the canister just slipped out of its hiding place, landed on the ground in a heap of rubble.' He gave a little grin. 'Scared the daylights out of the workmen. They took one look at it, decided it was a bomb and ran for their lives.'

At the bottom of a flight of steps the guard stopped and began counting through the rosary of keys that he had in his pocket. Selecting one, he rattled it into the lock and pushed the door open. They filed past him into a small room that smelt of damp and trapped air. The floor was uncarpeted, the furniture functional and the atmosphere as cosy as an interrogation cell.

*The Estuary Pilgrim* was propped against the far wall. It had no frame. Napier's first impression was of brilliant sunlight.

A warm afternoon's sky: intense blues, coral pinks and purple; summer clouds scudding overhead. Then sparkling water scored with deep shadows; sailing boats, bristling masts; slate-faced buildings; seagulls wheeling above.

He gazed at it in silence. It was much larger and more magnificent than he'd ever dared to imagine—a painting of hypnotic presence, filling the room with a radiance of its own.

Picard took up position beside him. 'I don't know anything about art,' he murmured after a few seconds. 'On the whole, I don't even know what I like, but I must admit that this is an exception. It's really most . . . impressive.' He gave a quick nod of his head.

The painting was of the old medieval harbour of Honfleur. A flock of fishing boats was moored to the jetty. The colour in the water was of clouded jade fretted into jigsaw patterns by the shadows of the boats. The day's catch of fish was scattered across the quayside, spilling out of wicker baskets in a slippery puddle. The silhouettes of ancient buildings framed the painting.

Napier moved close to the canvas and stroked the rough textures of its crusted paint. He relied on touch as much as sight when he examined a picture, using the soft pads of his fingers to judge the density of pigment, the degree of reworking that had taken place, the sequence of colours that had been applied.

As his fingertips ran across the dark copper-green shadows in the water, he sensed the paint suddenly lose body. It grew thin and filmy, became a fine wash of colour. Slightly surprising—not as he'd

expected. Then it thickened once more, where the light was striking. He felt the coarseness of heavily scumbled pigment, the dry consistency of repainted layers, and once again his pleasure sparked awake.

In the centre of the picture was a large three-masted clipper. Napier pointed to the hull, indicating its name. For there, carved on the stern and clearly visible, were the words *The Estuary Pilgrim*.

'How long has the painting been down here?' he asked.

'Since last night,' Picard replied. 'A firm of restorers restretched it and then sent it over.'

'And why do you keep it locked up in this little cubbyhole?'

'The press haven't heard of it yet—we decided to keep it under our hats, that is until we are quite sure what it is we're dealing with. You are the first person we've shown it to.'

'How flattering.'

'Coincidence, actually. You are the only Monet expert who happened to be in Paris at the moment,' Picard said, turning and walking across the room. 'It made you the logical choice. We mustn't be seen wasting the taxpayers' money.' He glanced back over his shoulder. 'Take a look at this.'

Lying on a table against the wall was a long metal cylinder. It was as thick as a drainage pipe and encrusted with dirt. One end was sealed with a steel cap, its rim rusted away to lace.

'This is what the picture was in when it was found,' Picard said. 'Sinister-looking contraption, isn't it? You can see why it gave the demolition workers such a fright.'

Stencilled along the body of the canister was a series of letters and numerals, only just visible beneath the rust and grime. Picard pointed to the letters CHE. 'This could be part of the name Eichendorff, but that's only a guess; the letters are too badly damaged to be legible.' Picard brushed the dust off his hands.

'There were twenty or thirty paintings on that convoy,' Napier said. 'The whole of von Eichendorff's collection. Now, if they were to turn up . . .'

'It would be quite a find,' Picard finished for him.

'It certainly would.'

Picard glanced at his watch and said, 'How about a drink?'

The guard, who had been sitting reading a newspaper, jumped to his feet and unlocked the door. They made their way upstairs and out into the sun-drenched courtyard.

'What were the rest of von Eichendorff's pictures like?' Picard asked, nodding to the police sentries at the gate.

'Spectacular,' Napier told him without emotion. He thought of the



faded photographs he'd pored over in French archives. 'He had *The Flight into Egypt* by Poussin, Delacroix's *Battle of the Amazons*, a Velázquez portrait, and a whole string of Bonnards. But *The Estuary Pilgrim* was the centrepiece of the collection.'

They crossed the road and sat down at a tin table outside a café. Picard summoned the waiter, ordered drinks and then sat back, stretching out his legs on the pavement.

'Well, what do you think of our discovery?' he asked. 'I mean in technical terms.'

Napier thought for a moment. He visualised the painting once more, feeling the texture of the paint beneath his fingertips.

'The paintwork in the shadows of the picture is slightly thinner than I would have expected.'

'Does that surprise you?'

'Not really,' replied Napier. 'Monet was only twenty-seven when he painted *The Estuary Pilgrim*. His style was still variable. What surprises me is that the painting exists at all. As far as I know, there has never been any suggestion of its surviving.'

'Ah, now there you're wrong,' Picard sat forward and raised a finger. 'About six months ago the curator of a museum in Honfleur put forward a theory that the picture might still exist. She wrote an article about it in the local press.'

The waiter arrived, bringing his tray down to rest on the edge of the table. He unloaded a glass of ice-cold lager and a cup of black coffee, scooped a tip into his apron and was gone again.

Napier pulled the glass towards him and took a sip. 'The real question now,' he said, brushing the froth off his upper lip, 'is, who owns *The Estuary Pilgrim*?'

'It's anybody's guess at present,' said Picard, taking his spoon from the coffee and wagging it across the table. 'The prime candidate is Lebas, the grandson of the original owner, but there is a possibility that von Eichendorff's family could have rights to it. It all rests on whether he bought the painting or just helped himself to it.'

'And what if no one can establish a legal claim?'

Picard's voice dropped to a murmur. 'Well, in that case the painting would naturally revert to the French government.'

'Which is why your shady little department is taking such a keen interest in its welfare.'

'Possibly,' Picard admitted. 'But we really need to know the answer. When news of this discovery hits the press, every opportunist and con artist will be crawling out of the woodwork to make a bid for it.'

Napier ran his finger down the side of his glass, drawing lines in the

condensation. 'Whoever does turn out to be the lucky owner has just become extremely rich.'

Picard nodded. 'Will you put a few of these facts down in writing for us?' he asked.

'What facts are those?'

Picard shrugged. 'The history of the picture, those technical points you were talking about—anything that comes to mind, really. I'm going to draft a press release in the next few days. It would help a great deal if I had your professional opinion to call on. We'll pay you, of course,' he added with a slight twinkle.

'I'd hate to waste your taxpayers' money.'

'I dare say they can afford it,' Picard replied as they shook hands. 'Besides, I doubt if you'll be able to retire on the proceeds.'

AFTER PICARD HAD GONE, Napier walked down the Rue Royale, picking his way through the current of summer tourists, and crossed over into the Tuileries Gardens. The air was filled with the fragrance of parched earth and baking bread.

He paused by the edge of a pond and watched the light flashing off the ripples. As he looked on, the water turned to paint, and the image of *The Estuary Pilgrim* burst into his head once more.

The sight of the great painting had disturbed memories that had lain dormant in Napier's mind for years.

Honfleur had been an important place in his life.

The first time he had been there was with Jane Fairfax, a girl as sleek as a seal, with a ribbon of shining brown hair that reached to her waist. They had stopped in the town at the end of one summer vacation. She had found a postcard with an old photograph of *The Estuary Pilgrim*, and they had whiled away the afternoon sitting on the quayside, their heads together, poring over the little picture.

That winter Napier had written about the painting, trying to work the sunlight, the boats and the contented dreaming conversation of the afternoon into his words. As he wrote, ideas grew and blossomed, and the description of *The Estuary Pilgrim* became one chapter in a book on Monet. In the following year, rather to his surprise, it was published and established his reputation as an art historian. In Napier's opinion it was not the best of all the books he had written, but he loved it as his first-born.

God, that was over ten years ago, he reflected. He hadn't thought of that day in Honfleur since he and Jane had parted, but now, as he gazed out across the gardens, the memory welled up in him, warm and urgent, spilling over into a loneliness that he couldn't explain.

## Chapter Two

Before leaving Paris, Napier spent three days with the picture. He came to know every brushstroke, each mark and configuration of paint by heart. A series of X-rays had been taken of the canvas, from which he was able to detect each stage of the painting's construction: the initial drawing of the composition, the building up of solid layers of paint, and the various alterations as the picture had developed.

Three days after Napier returned to London, *The Estuary Pilgrim* hit the headlines all over the world. Speculation as to who owned the Monet ran riot.

Later that summer the painting came to London on tour. Napier attended the private viewing at the National Gallery on a fresh evening in early September. It had been raining and the air was now sharp and fragrant, scrubbed clean by the downpour. He didn't like these formal occasions, but he was excited by the prospect of seeing *The Estuary Pilgrim* once more. He'd thought about it often in the past few weeks; it filled his mind like a tune that wouldn't go away.

The room was crowded by the time Napier arrived. He collected a glass of champagne and moved forward onto the tightly packed floor. All around him were faces he recognised, some that he didn't and several that he should have: Bond Street dealers, gallery staff, research historians, the Arts minister.

*The Estuary Pilgrim* hung on the far wall and dominated the room. A gilt frame had been made for the canvas, increasing its size and presence. Napier took a sip of dry bubbles and ran his eyes across the picture, taking in the familiar details.

'Delicious-looking fish on the quayside,' he heard a voice behind him murmur.

'I heard it was found on a rubbish heap,' said another.

'I'm a convert to fish, you know; hardly eat anything else . . .'

As Napier absorbed himself in the painting, a handsome woman with auburn hair and earrings of solid geometry drew alongside.

'Darling,' she growled at Napier, breathing cigarette smoke out through her nostrils. 'How very clever of you to come up with this new treat for us.'

'As a matter of fact, Margot, and as you very well know, all this had practically nothing to do with me,' Napier told her. 'I just checked the painting over for the French authorities.'

'But what needed checking?' she enquired. Reaching up and draping one arm round Napier's neck, she kissed his cheek and the

scrapyard of her jewellery jangled about his ears. Margot Latchman was a journalist; every morning she poisoned a column of the *Daily Express* with her social diary. She was a fund of gossip and rumour. 'The whole canvas exudes Monet,' she continued. 'The brushwork, the colour, even the subject says Monet.'

'Not forgetting the signature,' said Napier.

'Yes,' she agreed, 'that too.' She took Napier by the sleeve. 'There's a curious little man over there who seems to know you,' she whispered. 'He's been watching you like a hawk since he came in.'

Napier followed the direction of her gaze.

He was an unprepossessing individual standing by himself. His suit had been bought in instalments: the trousers were older than the jacket and had become shiny from constant wear. As their eyes met across the room he smiled at Napier and gave a little bobbing bow.

'Ghastly man,' observed Margot. 'He looks like the editor of some dreary left-wing newspaper. Do you recognise him, John?'

'Never seen him before in my life,' said Napier.

'Well, he certainly seems to know you.' Margot leaned in close. 'John, darling,' she said confidentially, 'between you and me . . .'

'And your five million sensation-starved readers.'

'Them too,' she agreed. 'But what I wanted to ask you is, who owns this painting?'

Napier shrugged. 'I would have thought the heirs of the original owner have the best chance.'

'Maurice Lebas, you mean?'

'You know him?'

Margot pivoted round on her heel, scanning the room. 'He's here tonight,' she said. 'Do you want to meet him?'

'Why not?'

'Because he's a surly bastard, that's why not,' she told him.

'I thought that's how you like them, Margot.'

She dropped her lashes, flashing blue eye shadow at him. 'We'd better hurry,' she said. 'I see he's on his way out.'

Trailing scent and sienna hair, the lavender muslin of her dress floating in and out in her wake, Margot led the way, intercepting a couple as they were heading out of the door.

'Maurice,' she said, offering the man her hand and barring his path, 'how nice to see you. Margot Latchman—we met at Cannes.'

Lebas bowed stiffly from the waist. 'Of course, madame,' he said with pea-soup vowels. He clearly didn't recognise her.

'I so wanted you to meet Dr Napier,' Margot continued.

Lebas looked him over with small bullet-hole eyes. He was a short,

powerfully built man, dressed in a blue blazer and red tie. His face was thickset and plebeian, the salt-and-pepper hair cut down to bristle. 'Should I know you?' he asked.

'Why, of course,' his wife fluttered. 'This is Dr Napier, *chéri*. We have him to thank for authenticating the picture.'

'Ah, yes,' said Lebas, a gleam of interest coming into his eyes, 'and you were well paid by the French government, I believe, Dr Napier.' He nodded. 'Are you also going to support their claim to owning my picture?' he asked softly.

'But we're not sure if the painting is yours yet, Maurice,' his wife interceded, a nervous little smile fluttering about her face. 'That is until the court has made its decision.'

An expression of disbelief mobilised Lebas's features. 'That picture was stolen from my family,' he said flatly. 'It is mine, Dr Napier.'

'I'm certain you're right,' said Napier soothingly.

Lebas seemed to collect himself. 'Will you excuse us,' he said. 'Nadine and I are already late for an appointment.' Taking his wife by the arm, he propelled her towards the doorway.

Margot waited until they had left the room.

'One of life's natural gentlemen, wouldn't you say?'

'He certainly comes straight to the point.'

'I did warn you,' she reminded him. 'I must be going too. Why don't we have lunch some time?'

'I'd like that.'

She reached up, brushing his cheek with a kiss, and then waved her long-nailed fingers at him in parting.

Napier turned and strolled back across the floor. It was after nine and the room was beginning to clear. Standing in front of *The Estuary Pilgrim* was the man Margot had observed watching him earlier. He stood like a shabby sentry, staring up at the canvas, a dark silhouette against the radiance of sea and sunlight.

As Napier passed, the man turned and gazed at him with pale eyes. 'Dr Napier?' he asked quietly.

'That's right.'

The man blinked, and a small smile budded onto his lips. 'I was hoping I might run into you.'

'How's that?' Napier asked, pausing by the gilt frame.

'I was admiring the painting,' the little man continued, looking up at it once more. 'It's really most remarkable.' Then he lowered the pale searchlight of his eyes from the canvas and directed them at Napier. 'But you do realise that it's a fake.'

'What makes you say that?'



'Because it's the truth.'

'Can you prove it?'

Again the smile pouted his lips. 'But of course, Dr Napier. I wouldn't be here this evening if I couldn't.'

Napier felt his skin crawl. The man had spent too long in the shade; his flesh was soft and white, and his mouth as red as a poisonous berry. 'And what is this proof you have?'

He appeared to be offended by this remark. 'Come, come, Dr Napier, this is hardly the place to talk of such things. Shall we discuss the matter elsewhere?' He gestured towards the door. 'It'll be worth your while. That I can promise you.'

Napier had nowhere else he had to go, and his curiosity was pricking him. What did he have to lose? 'Very well,' he said.

They left the National Gallery together. Shop windows, neon signs and streetlights illuminated the traffic that surged around Trafalgar Square. Napier's companion led the way with great determination. Reaching a wine bar near the Haymarket, the man stopped and looked in through the plate-glass window.

'This should serve our purpose,' he said, pushing in through the door and making his way to a table at the far end of the room. 'Perhaps you would do the honours, Dr Napier,' he murmured, nodding his head towards the bar.

It was on the tip of Napier's tongue to tell him to go and boil his head, but he checked himself.

'Very well,' he said. 'I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name.'

'Barnabas; you may call me Barnabas.'

It was clearly a pseudonym.

'Barnabas?' repeated Napier. 'Barnabas who?'

'I think that is sufficient for now,' he said primly.

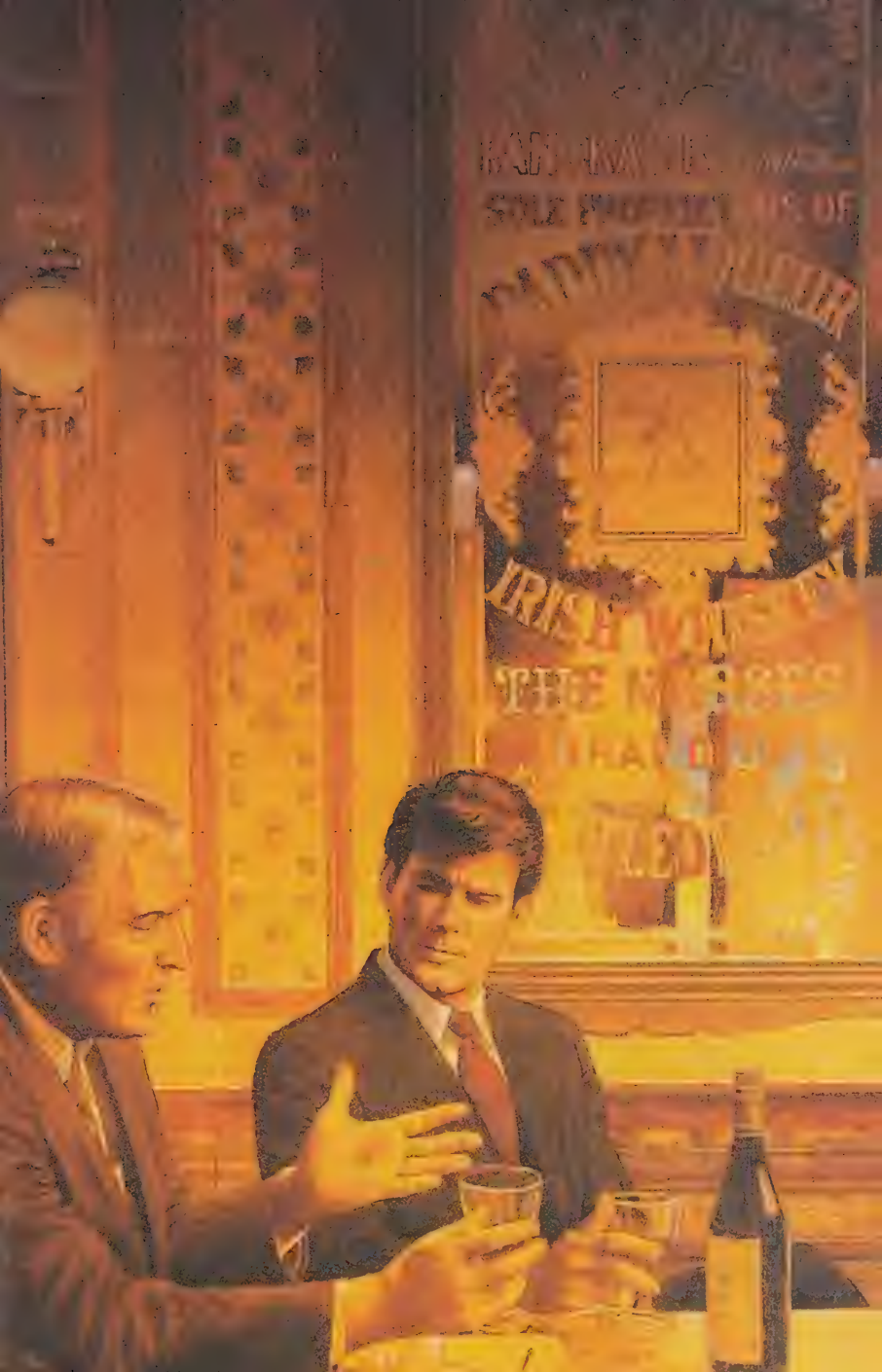
Napier went to the far side of the bar. From where he was standing, through the screen of figures who jostled round him, he had a clear view of Barnabas.

It was impossible to judge the man's age: his hair was thin and beginning to recede, but the face beneath was not that of an old man. It was round and pasty, the expression sensual. It was a weak face, an indulgent face—the face of a rogue vicar.

'Can I get you anything, sir?' asked the barman.

Napier turned round a few degrees. 'Give me a bottle of house red, will you? Two glasses.'

The barman opened a bottle and set a pair of glasses on the bar alongside. Napier paid, and gathering them together into one hand, he returned to the table.



'Now,' he said, taking a seat opposite Barnabas and filling the glasses, 'if I understood you right, you are able to prove that *The Estuary Pilgrim* is a fake.'

Barnabas took a pull at the wine. 'That's right.'

'How?'

'Ah, don't get me wrong,' he said, emptying the glass. 'I'm not an art historian like yourself, Dr Napier. I know nothing about painting, but I do have irrefutable evidence that the picture you've discovered is not all that it seems to be.'

'Do you have this evidence with you?' asked Napier.

'Not with me,' Barnabas replied, refilling his glass.

'Are you going to give me some idea of what it is?'

'How much would it be worth to you, Dr Napier?'

'You want me to pay for it?'

He turned his pale sheep's eyes onto Napier and nodded slowly. 'After all, it's your reputation that's at stake. If I can prove that your picture is a fake, it's going to make you look rather foolish, isn't it?'

Napier shook his head in disbelief. 'It wouldn't do me much good, I grant you, but it wouldn't do much damage either. You've picked the wrong man, Barnabas. If it's money you want, approach the owner; he's the one with something to lose.'

'I thought of that,' Barnabas agreed. 'Unfortunately, no one seems to know who owns the painting.'

'Try your luck with Maurice Lebas,' said Napier with a touch of irony in his voice. 'See how he takes to being blackmailed.'

Barnabas took the remark seriously. 'I imagine he'd react very violently, Dr Napier. And Lebas is an influential man, quite capable of having my evidence suppressed or destroyed.'

'And you along with it, no doubt,' Napier added.

'My thoughts exactly,' replied Barnabas. His voice dropped to a sigh. 'But if, on the other hand, you were to approach him . . .'

There was a moment of complete silence.

'So what you're suggesting . . .'

'What I'm suggesting is a partnership,' said Barnabas, suddenly leaning forward. 'That painting is worth millions. What I have in my possession will reduce its value to nothing.'

'And you think the owner, whoever he turns out to be, will pay to keep you quiet?'

'If the threat is real enough, yes,' replied Barnabas. 'And that's where you fit in. I have the evidence, but not the influence to make it stick. If, on the other hand, you were to announce that the painting was a fake, they'd pay attention.'

'Aren't you overlooking one thing?' asked Napier. 'If you've managed to find this evidence, there's a good chance someone else might also come across it.'

'It's most unlikely,' replied Barnabas, and the smirk returned to his mouth. 'I'd say the odds are a million to one against. I've thought this through with great care; nothing has been left to chance.'

The man was a crank. Napier couldn't help laughing at him. 'Nothing left to chance, Barnabas?' he echoed. 'You don't even know who you're trying to blackmail yet.'

Barnabas had lost the initiative and he knew it. 'Of course I had to expect this reaction at first,' he said. 'But you'll change your mind when you see what it is I've discovered.'

'Don't bank on it, Barnabas.'

'I suggest, therefore, that we call a temporary halt to the proceedings while you consider my proposal.' Pulling himself to his feet, he prepared to leave. 'In the meantime, I shall fetch the evidence.'

'If it exists.'

'Oh, it exists all right,' said Barnabas. 'I'll return in a week, and I'll prove to you that the painting is a fake.' He sketched a quick bow, and turning about, he pushed his way through the crowd to the door and was gone.

Napier poured himself the remains of the bottle. Leaning back with a groan of relaxation, he raised the glass to his lips and savoured the warm flavour on his palate.

The whole interview had lasted under an hour. He would have put the incident out of his mind had Barnabas not been murdered three days later.

## Chapter Three

Barnabas was found floating in the harbour of Honfleur.

The morning tide had carried his body in beneath the moored boats, where it lay face down among the seaweed and flotsam. The dark mackintosh that he had been wearing at the time of his death held him low in the water, so that his outspread limbs scarcely broke the surface.

It was nine o'clock when a yachtsman spotted the body and summoned the police. A crowd assembled on the quayside and watched in horrified excitement as the corpse was dragged ashore, water streaming from the sodden clothing.

The post-mortem revealed that Barnabas had been drifting in the

sea for over six hours. It was not the sea that had killed him, however; he had already been dead for some time when he was pitched into the harbour. Barnabas had died from a knife wound in the back.

'Death would have been almost instantaneous,' the police pathologist announced. Barnabas lay on an aluminium trolley in the mortuary. 'The blade entered the body close to the spinal column, puncturing the pleural membrane and severing the aorta as it passed.'

'Any sign of a struggle?' Chief Inspector Chaumière asked.

'None. He was bending over at the time of his death.' The pathologist prodded his finger into the aperture at an acute angle to simulate the blade. 'The killer stabbed him from behind while he was leaning forward.'

'Was he sitting or standing?' Chaumière asked.

'I'd say standing.'

Chaumière turned to the police sergeant, who stood by the door. 'What do we have on him?' he asked.

The sergeant extracted his notebook from his breast pocket and leafed through the pages.

'Charles Barnabas,' he read out. 'He was English, lived in London, presently staying at the Hôtel Delaroche. He arrived in Honfleur on Thursday and was due to leave this morning.'

'Any reason why he was here?'

The sergeant shook his head. 'Not that I know of,' he replied, 'but earlier this year he spent four days in the same hotel.'

'Personal belongings?'

'They're upstairs.'

Chaumière glanced round the white sterilised room and went out. Running his hands through the wiry curls of his hair to rid it of the smell of the mortuary, he followed the sergeant to an office on the first floor.

The contents of Barnabas's pockets had been transferred into a cardboard box. Chaumière turned them out onto the desk. They were pathetic, useless possessions on the whole: a handful of coins, a lighter, a packet of indigestion tablets and an imitation-leather wallet. The only object to catch his attention was a medal.

It was a German Iron Cross, second class.

Chaumière examined it closely, turning it round in the palm of his hand, and then glanced up, a question framed on his face.

'He was a research historian,' the sergeant told him before being asked. 'Specialised in the Second World War.'

Chaumière tossed the medal back on the desk top and picked up the wallet. It was cold and clammy, like seaweed. There were several



banknotes inside, along with the usual collection of receipts, credit cards and bus passes. One by one Chaumière extracted them and laid them out. The bill from a restaurant in Honfleur he set to one side, as he did the stub of a ticket from the Boudin Museum. Written on a sheet of notebook paper was an address in Shepherd Market, London. The words were smudged from the water but still legible.

“‘Dr John Napier,’” Chaumière read, picking out each letter in turn. Handing the scrap of paper over to the sergeant, he said, ‘Get on to Scotland Yard. Ask them to check it out.’

AS BARNABAS’S BODY was being dragged from the cold water of Honfleur harbour, Jacqui Fontenay was walking past on her way to work. She saw the crowd pressing round the quayside and caught a brief glimpse of the dead body as it was rolled onto the shore. She turned her head away and hurried on.

Skirting the church and the separate stump of the bell tower, she walked down into the Place Hamelin. A group of workmen grumbled out their appreciation of Jacqui’s legs as she passed, grinning and gesturing towards her with outspread hands. She flashed a smile back at them over her shoulder.

The Musée Eugène Boudin was closed when she arrived. Seeing her approach, the elderly doorman unlocked one of the glass doors and held it open for her to slip inside.

Jacqui was the assistant curator of the museum. She was twenty-six and proud of her position, although it hardly taxed her capabilities. Murmuring good morning to the doorman and to the lady in the ticket booth, she went upstairs.

The main galleries were deserted and still dark. She reviewed each painting as she passed: scenes of Honfleur harbour filled with amber light; fishing boats laying out their nets; views of the Seine estuary, with the wind whipping across the water.

Jacqui knew them all, recognised each one like an old acquaintance. She had loved paintings for as long as she could remember, ever since she’d looked at the colour reproductions in her father’s books as a child. Pictures fascinated her, touched her imagination, filled her with sunlit moods and memories.

In her office, she sat down and began sorting through the day’s mail. Catching her reflection in the mirror, she tossed her head and combed back the shining mane of tawny hair with her fingers.

She had left work early the day before; her guardian had been giving a reception and she’d been needed at his house to act as hostess. It was a role she often assumed, a part she was expected to

play for him. Jacqui was his ambassador as much as his ward.

This had been quite an occasion—dinner served in a marquee on the lawn, a small band playing in the background. By the time she had driven herself back to Honfleur and crawled into bed, it had been almost three in the morning.

There was a knock on the door and Chantal arrived. Short spiky hair and heavily made-up eyes, a tight pink T-shirt.

‘Have you heard the news?’ she panted. ‘A man’s been murdered; they’ve just found his body in the harbour. I saw him.’

Getting to her feet, Jacqui went over to the filing cabinet.

‘So did I, but that doesn’t mean—’

‘You don’t understand,’ Chantal cut in, flushed and excited. ‘I recognised him. He was here.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Didn’t you read my message?’ Exasperation in her voice now. She pointed to the desk, where a patch of yellow paper was stuck to one leaf of a rubber plant.

Jacqui peeled it off. A man calling himself Barnabas had stopped in, the note said. He’d be returning in the morning.

‘He arrived just after you’d left,’ Chantal explained. ‘Came in here and demanded to see you.’

‘Did he mention me by name?’

Chantal nodded, her eyes shining with the intrigue.

‘He said he needed to speak to you about the article—the one you wrote in the newspapers.’

DETECTIVE SERGEANT Baker didn’t stand on ceremony.

‘Charles Barnabas,’ he said, holding up his warrant card in the passageway. ‘He was an acquaintance of yours, I believe.’

Napier turned the name over in his mind. ‘Not that I know of.’

Baker produced a small black and white photograph.

‘Oh, Barnabas,’ said Napier, recognising the picture. ‘I thought it was his Christian name.’ Napier held the door of his flat open. ‘Actually, I didn’t think it was a name at all.’

Sergeant Baker digested this information. He was a quiet, soft-spoken man, with the pleasant authority of a schoolmaster. His hair was thick and unruly, and the suit that he wore appeared to have been pressed under the mattress.

‘I see,’ he said, looking round Napier’s flat with interest. ‘So I take it that you don’t know the gentleman that well?’

‘I only met him once in my life,’ replied Napier, sitting down. He gestured towards the sofa, but Baker preferred to stand.

‘Only your name and address were found in his wallet at the time of his death,’ Baker continued.

Napier looked up sharply. ‘He’s dead?’

‘Murdered, to be more precise.’

Baker pulled out a notebook and flicked open its cover. ‘“Charles Oliver Barnabas: freelance researcher, presently working for Agamemnon Books,”’ he read. ‘“He died from a single knife wound in the back, and his body was later discovered floating in the harbour of Honfleur.”’ He shut the book and tucked it away. ‘He was killed the night before last. We were wondering if you could clarify how your name came to be on the body.’

In a few sentences Napier outlined the conversation they’d had in the wine bar and Barnabas’s proposition.

‘This painting you mention,’ Baker said when Napier was through. ‘Mr Barnabas suggested that it might be a fake?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But I thought you’d proved it was genuine?’

‘So did I,’ Napier replied. ‘But with every painting there is always a grey area, a margin of doubt. It’s very hard to fake a painting. Every stage of the technique must be reproduced with meticulous care. The paint must be laid on in an identical style to that of the artist’s. The surface of the picture must be made to crack and the pigments encouraged to deteriorate, to simulate the age of the original.’

‘But that can all be done, I imagine.’

‘Oh, yes,’ Napier agreed. ‘But what is much harder is fabricating the provenance of the picture.’

The word was lost on Baker.

‘Every picture has a history,’ Napier explained. ‘There are records, letters, documents. Most fakes are exposed because they don’t have a past—a painting turns up out of the blue. No one has ever heard of it. It’s immediately suspicious.’

‘None of which applies to *The Estuary Pilgrim*.’

‘That’s right,’ Napier agreed. ‘Anyone forging *The Estuary Pilgrim* would have no problem with the painting’s past. It’s documented in a dozen books, including my own. He hasn’t even got to worry about the composition of the painting, as there are several good black and white photographs to copy.’

A gleam of understanding came into Baker’s eye. ‘Which makes it an ideal subject for a fake.’

‘Practically irresistible, I would have thought.’

‘So what convinced you that it was the real thing?’

‘X-rays,’ Napier told him. Jumping to his feet, he picked up a folder

from his desk and pulled out a sheaf of photographs. These he spread out on a coffee table, assembling them into a rectangle. 'Oil paintings react to X-rays in much the same way as our own bodies,' he explained. 'The X-ray strips away the surface of the picture, exposing what's going on beneath.' Napier pointed to the dark silhouette of the quayside in the composite picture. 'Here, for example, there used to be two figures leaning on the parapet. They are quite clear in the X-ray, but if you look at the finished picture, you'll see they've been painted over. This boat beside them must have been added later, however, because you can still see the horizon of the sea cutting through its sails.

'Now, if this painting were a copy,' Napier continued, 'there wouldn't be any of these alterations. The artist would have traced the finished design straight onto the canvas.'

Baker nodded thoughtfully. 'So what you're saying is that all the evidence suggests that the painting is genuine.'

'That's right,' said Napier. He gazed down at the X-rays. 'And yet I have the strangest feeling that it's not.'

'Not?' Baker echoed. 'I don't follow . . .'

Napier's mind was back in the basement room, his fingers running across the canvas, feeling it, sensing the texture. 'The paint is thinner than it should be. It doesn't have the density of Monet's brushwork.' His voice lightened and drifted as he looked away into the distance. 'As though it were not a painting, but an illustration of a painting . . .'

JACQUI WALKED ACROSS the gleaming floor of the first gallery, her cool summer dress moulding round the flow of her body. She looked at the paintings on either side of her, at the visitors who stopped to peer at them, but in her mind she saw a man floating in the water, a man called Barnabas, who had come to see her.

She paused in the passageway between the two main galleries. Set on the wall was a tall exhibition board. It carried an enlarged black and white photograph of General von Eichendorff's headquarters in the Hôtel de Ville. An elegant room, impeccably furnished, with a junior officer sitting at a small desk. Field telephones and ordered paperwork, bronze table lamps and silver-capped inkstands on a larger desk. An atmosphere of high command. On the wall was the famous collection of twenty-five paintings.

Jacqui inspected the exhibition board thoughtfully. This was where it had started. This was the photograph that had led her to write the article suggesting that the largest painting, *The Estuary Pilgrim*, might still exist.

She had chanced upon it one day in the museum archives and showed it to the chief curator. With his agreement she had it enlarged and wrote captions describing the history of each painting, what it represented and where it had come from. Then, beneath the picture, she explained how the famous collection had been destroyed by the Resistance on the morning of May 16, 1944.

A few weeks after it was put on view, a polite and scrupulously dressed art dealer from Geneva had presented himself at her office. Madame had been deceived, he announced. The view of *La Ferme Saint Siméon* by Alexander Dubourg, which he had just seen in the photograph upstairs, had not been destroyed during the war. He had it in his gallery back in Switzerland.

From Geneva he sent her a colour reproduction of the Dubourg. Jacqui compared it with the painting in her photograph. The two were identical. She was interested; her instincts were aroused. Going to the public-records office in Le Havre, she found a memorandum from von Eichendorff to his aide, dated May 9, 1944, ordering that twenty-five paintings be packaged for shipment. The list included the little landscape by Alexander Dubourg.

Gradually, during the course of the summer, she built up a dossier on von Eichendorff's collection, but nothing in it could explain why a single painting had survived the attack.

On a warm Sunday afternoon she drove out to the country and found the exact site of the ambush. It was on a dusty stretch of road high above the Seine valley. The road was cut into the ragged slope of the hillside. Below her she could make out the long vertebrae of barges patiently working their way upstream.

A local farmer, passing on a tractor, helped her to find the information she needed. He was too young to remember much about the war himself, but his uncle had been in the Resistance. Taking Jacqui to a café in the nearby village, he summoned him and explained what it was she wanted.

The uncle said he knew of the ambush . . . No, most of that group were gone now . . . But there was Père Bouvier. He was living with his granddaughter, over at Epreville.

The following weekend Jacqui visited the old man.

Paul Bouvier was out in the garden. He was over ninety and as fragile as china. With a childlike expression of curiosity on his face, he sat in the shade of an apple tree. The granddaughter led Jacqui across the lawn to him and left them together.

The old man's memory was vague. He spoke of the war with a quiet sadness, holding Jacqui's hand as he talked.



'There were reprisals,' he said. 'Always reprisals. We told ourselves that we were helping to win the war, that there were bound to be casualties . . . but I think of them now.'

He looked at her with eyes that had grown gentle with age. 'Do you have a boyfriend?' he asked suddenly, and then smiled when Jacqui shook her head. 'You should,' he said. 'You're so lovely . . . golden like summer.' The words seemed to stir the surface of his memory. 'It was summer then,' he said, 'at Criquetot.'

Jacqui leaned forward, her voice soft as the coming of evening. 'Do you remember it?'

The old man nodded, gazing back into the past. 'Yes,' he murmured, 'I remember. It was a terrible sight—lorries overturned and burning, dead men lying on the roadside.' He shook his head.

'Was everything in the convoy burnt?'

'No. The charges had gone off late. The two front lorries were undamaged.'

'Did anyone look inside them?'

'Of course,' he replied, with a little shrug of his shoulders. 'We always took what we could find. There were several boxes of papers, I remember, and two or three metal canisters.'

Jacqui's heart leaped. 'Do you know what was in them?'

'I've no idea. One of them was enormous, as large as a telegraph pole. It needed two men to pull the thing out of the lorry.'

'Where did they take it?'

The old man shook his head once more; his memory drifted and lost its focus. 'It was a long time ago . . .'

Over the next two days Jacqui wrote an article for the *Normande Soir*. In it she laid out her research. She described the paintings and the ambush, how the lorries had been looted by Resistance fighters. In her conclusion she suggested that the enormous canister that Paul Bouvier had seen carried away after the attack contained the rolled-up canvas of *The Estuary Pilgrim*.

Six months later, when the painting was discovered on a demolition site nearby, her theory was proved correct. And now this man Barnabas had come wanting to talk of her article, and his death preyed on her mind. But there was no reason to assume a link between his visit and his death, and as Jacqui walked back across the gallery she dismissed the doubts that had gathered in her mind.

'WHAT WAS BARNABAS like?' Margot Latchman asked.

'The word that springs to mind is venomous,' Napier told her.

'I am glad,' she murmured, breathing out a trail of cigarette smoke

that matched her blue eyes. 'It's so tiresome when people turn out to be nicer than you'd expected.'

Lunch at Green's was drawing to a close; the bustle had left the room, and the afternoon light was bowling in through the plate-glass window. Pleading a diet, Margot had toyed with a salad of frilly green lettuce. Nevertheless, she'd helped to sink a bottle of champagne, and as the meal progressed her conversation had grown drowsy with gossip and flirtation.

'Who do you think killed him?' she asked.

Napier shrugged.

'Maurice Lebas?' she purred softly.

'He certainly wouldn't welcome any suggestion that the picture was a fake, but I can't believe he'd resort to murder. He doesn't even know whether he owns the picture yet.'

'He thinks he does, ducky, which comes to the same thing.'

'What do you know about him?'

'Nothing particularly revealing,' she confessed. Reaching forward, she stubbed out her cigarette and the gold bracelets jangled round her wrist. 'About twenty years ago Lebas inherited the family shipping business in Le Havre. He expanded into construction and now builds supermarkets, concrete car parks and motorways all over northern France. It's quite an empire.'

'So if Barnabas had proved to be a thorn in his side, he would have had no difficulty in having him removed?'

Margot looked him over with cool, appraising eyes. 'None.'

'Where is he at present?'

'He's still here in London, holed up in the Ritz, along with his private army of chauffeurs and bodyguards.'

Napier shook his head. 'I just can't believe it. Lebas might look like the classroom bully but hardly like a murderer.'

The fine pencilled eyebrows were raised. 'Appearances can be deceptive, John,' she growled, and pointed across the restaurant. 'Take him, for example.'

Her painted finger was aimed towards an alcove in the far corner of the room, at a man in his early fifties, sleekly dressed in a lightweight suit, an even inch of ash on the tip of his cigar. Across the table was an attractive girl, drinking Perrier water.

'What would you say he was?'

'A commodity broker,' Napier replied, 'but I've no doubt that you're going to tell me that he's a white-slave-trader.'

'Close,' she acknowledged. 'Enrique de la Pena. He's a dealer in illegal arms. Also reputed to traffic in drugs, but you'd never guess it

to look at him.' She smiled seductively. 'It's the same with Lebas; I don't think you can judge him by appearances.'

'But then you always see the best in people, don't you, Margot?'

'Don't be cheeky, darling.' She leaned back. As usual, she was dressed in lavender, and the material of the frock clung to her like woodsmoke. Napier had no idea how old she was. She could be thirty-five and slightly ravaged by experience or a well-preserved fifty.

'Do you mind if I use this story?' she asked.

'You're not going to suggest that Lebas murdered Barnabas?'

'Oh, I won't go so far as to accuse him. I'll just plant some innuendoes.' She glanced across at him. 'Any objections?'

'None,' replied Napier. 'But if you're going to risk our necks, you can pay for lunch; charge it up to expenses.'

'In that case I'll have a cognac,' she said, turning and catching the waiter's attention. 'One should always be a bit tight at three o'clock—it's such a pointless hour of the day.'

Napier waited until the balloon of cognac had arrived before asking, 'Have you heard of Agamemnon Books? Barnabas was working for them when he went over to France.'

'Yes,' Margot said, 'I've come across Agamemnon. They're up near Covent Garden, specialise in those big glossy books you see at cut price on railway stations: *The Anorexic Cookbook*, *How to Enjoy Life with a Broken Back*. Dozens of illustrations, dreadful text.' She pulled a face. 'You know the type.'

'Yes,' said Napier sadly, 'I think I do.'

Margot finished her cognac and they went out into the sedate congestion of Duke Street. Spotting a taxi, she flagged it down and left in a flutter of lavender skirts and parting kisses.

On impulse Napier headed on towards Covent Garden. It took him some time to find Agamemnon Books.

The publishing house was situated on a landing between the second and third floors of a tall brick building in Long Acre. The editor was solicitous. He introduced himself as James Wilmott and answered Napier's questions with a quiet reserve.

'Charles Barnabas,' he said. 'Yes, of course. He worked for us on several occasions, doing picture research.'

As he spoke, he led Napier back into a small private office. 'We were very sorry to hear about his accident. A terrible business,' he said as he sat at his desk.

'What was he working on at the time?' Napier asked.

'He was collecting pictures for a new book we're doing on the D-day invasion,' Wilmott replied. 'He was going through the public

records in Normandy, looking for any previously unpublished photographs we could use as illustrations.'

'I see,' said Napier. 'Why did he choose Honfleur in particular?'

'I've no idea,' replied Wilmott. Swivelling in his chair, he pulled out a file from the shelf behind him. 'But I think he must have been onto something—he rang in July, asking me to check a name.' Wilmott extracted a scrap of paper. 'He wanted information on a German officer serving in Normandy during the latter stages of the war.'

'What name?'

'Schwartz—Dietrich Schwartz.' He passed the note to Napier.

'Did you find anything?'

Wilmott nodded. 'We have a contact in Berlin.' He picked up a flimsy telex sheet. 'Dietrich Schwartz signed into the German Wehrmacht in nineteen thirty-seven, rose to the rank of major in the Twenty-first Panzer Division and was, for a short time, the adjutant to a General von Eichendorff.'

'Does it say what became of him?' Napier asked softly.

Wilmott returned to the sheet. 'Yes. Schwartz was shot for desertion in May nineteen forty-four. He's buried in Honfleur.'

## Chapter Four

Edward Roland Spooner didn't have an appointment. The oversight distressed him. It introduced an element of chance into the otherwise ordered routine of his day. With an air of fatalism he pushed the doorbell of Napier's flat. As he'd expected, there was no reply.

Spooner swivelled round and scanned the street through his spectacles. The café on the corner of Shepherd Market had tables laid out on the pavement. Skimming across the road, he selected one with a commanding view of Napier's front door and sat down, settling his briefcase on the ground beside him. He then ordered a pot of tea.

As soon as the tea was finished, he planted the tip of his umbrella between his feet, folded his hands across the curved bamboo of the handle and waited. No one noticed him sitting at the table. In his black coat, striped trousers and bowler hat, Spooner was not a man to catch the eye. His one striking feature was his solemnity. It was a solid, palpable presence, as real as the glass case round the exposed works of a bell clock. Some of the junior executives in the firm made fun of this gravity. They referred to him as 'the undertaker'. Spooner ignored their clumsy humour. He was good at his job, and that was all he cared about. Where others failed, he got results.

In his bare office high on the twenty-first floor, with his back to the large plate-glass windows that looked over the smoky silhouette of Tower Bridge, Spooner worked his way through the close-printed figures of account books, statements and insurance claims.

Petty claims on property and household possessions didn't concern him; these he passed on to the appropriate departments. It was the rare cases that interested him most—the taxation frauds, the embezzlement of corporate funds, the computer swindles.

Spooner had a nose for fraud. Just as some men can scent danger or the presence of rain in the air, he could scent deceit in the forms before him. It was a gift he had been born with.

His investigations were meticulous and often painstakingly slow. The fastidious mind that insisted that pencils and notepads were arranged in geometric patterns on the desk top enabled Spooner to strip down a financial report with the skill of a craftsman, to examine each entry without tiring and then to go back and begin all over again if he hadn't put his finger on the mistake he needed to break the case. His career was his life, his single consuming passion.

After an hour of sitting stiff as a tailor's dummy, Spooner was rewarded. A taxi drew up in front of the building opposite, and Napier stepped out onto the pavement.

Spooner recognised him immediately. John Napier was something of a celebrity. He appeared on television, in documentaries and chat shows, talking about the arts in his soft, educated voice.

Spooner hurried across the road, paused as Napier was unlocking the door and gave a little cough to register his presence. 'Dr Napier?' he queried. He thrust out his hand and said, 'Spooner.'

Napier glanced across the street. 'You've been waiting for me?'

'Only a few minutes,' he lied in the interest of good manners. 'I was hoping to have a word with you.'

Napier led the way upstairs and waited until Spooner had taken a seat before asking, 'And how can I help you?'

'The Monet on loan to the National Gallery,' replied Spooner, coming straight to the point. 'I believe you suggested to the police that it might be a fake.'

'I told them they shouldn't rule out the possibility.'

'And then in the morning papers I discovered this article.' He clicked open his briefcase and drew out Margot Latchman's column from the *Daily Express*. 'You've read it, no doubt? It accuses Maurice Lebas of killing Charles Barnabas.'

'It doesn't actually accuse him of it,' Napier replied. 'It just happens to place his name nearest to the accusation.'



Spooner slipped the article back into his briefcase. 'Of course, only one issue of any importance emerges from the whole affair. Is *The Estuary Pilgrim* a fake or not?'

'Why should all this concern you?' Napier asked.

'I represent Wallace-Jones,' Spooner replied primly. 'We're a firm of accountancy consultants—financial loss adjusters, you might say. In the last two years a number of potential forgeries have come to our attention, forgeries so good that we can find no firm evidence that they *are* forgeries.'

'How very frustrating for you. And now you're scared that *The Estuary Pilgrim* might turn out to be the latest in this line.'

'Quite so,' Spooner agreed. 'In which case it is considerably more ambitious than anything we've seen before. The other pictures were valued between ten and a hundred thousand dollars. *The Estuary Pilgrim* is presently insured for ten million while it's here in London.'

'You think your forger is becoming more confident?'

Spooner nodded. 'But this time we have a lead on him.'

'You mean Barnabas?'

'Barnabas,' he repeated. 'He was convinced *The Estuary Pilgrim* was a fake, and died, it seems, trying to prove it. Barnabas was only in Honfleur for a few days, but in that short space of time he must have seen something that proved beyond question that *The Estuary Pilgrim* was a forgery.' A smile flitted across his face. 'I would have thought that our next course of action was clear.'

Napier looked at Spooner in astonishment. He could see exactly where the little man was leading him. 'You're not suggesting that I go over to Honfleur to search for it, are you?'

'That's precisely what I'm suggesting,' replied Spooner. 'Naturally, I'll come with you.'

'Barnabas told me that the chances of anyone else finding his evidence were a million to one against.'

'We know which hotel he was staying in, what he was doing there, even the restaurants he visited. I'd say that improves the odds.'

Napier had to admit he was intrigued. 'So you think that if we went over to France and reconstructed Barnabas's movements, we might stumble across the same information?'

'It's a long shot, I grant you, but I feel it's worth a try.'

Napier held his gaze for a moment. 'It sounds like a harebrained scheme to me,' he said eventually.

'But you'll consider it?'

Napier nodded.

Immediately Spooner was on his feet and holding out his hand.

'Good,' he murmured. Opening his briefcase, he flicked out a card and handed it to him. 'Here's my number,' he announced. 'Give me a ring when you've reached a decision.'

JACQUI FONTENAY also read Margot's article.

'Where did you find this?' she asked Chief Inspector Chaumière when she had finished.

'It was printed in an English newspaper this morning,' he replied. 'Scotland Yard rang me and suggested I look out for it.'

'It comes from a gossip column, Inspector. The lady who wrote this is just stirring up a bit of scandal to sell newspapers.'

'Yes, but what if there is some foundation to her allegations? If the painting turns out to be a fake—'

'It's not. This whole article is hearsay. It's based on the evidence of one art historian. He's not even mentioned by name.'

'It's the chap who authenticated it in the first place.'

Jacqui's eyes clouded. 'John Napier?'

'You know him?'

'I've read one of his books,' she murmured with a frown.

The name lingered with her after Chaumière had left her office. That evening, on returning to her apartment, she pulled out a heavy volume on Monet, cradling it in her arms. There, on the front page, beneath the title, was the name John Napier.

This was the first art book she'd ever owned. Her parents had given it to her on her sixteenth birthday. Now she felt only disappointment that this book could have been written by the same person who was involved in some shabby publicity stunt.

Taking it over to the table, Jacqui began reading through the author's biography on the flyleaf. It didn't tell her much, just an outline of Napier's academic training. There was no photograph.

On the opposite page was an inscription from her parents. Smoothing down the page, she touched the dried ink, as though this minute contact would bring the memory of them closer.

Hearing her return, Pacquetta had come to the kitchen door, wiping her broad red hands on a dishcloth.

'The police were looking for you,' she said gruffly.

'I know,' said Jacqui. 'Inspector Chaumière found me.'

Pacquetta gave a grunt of acknowledgment and tossed the cloth down on the worktop. 'Are you going out tonight?' she asked. 'If you ask me, you should be going out, meeting people, not sitting in here reading books.'

'I've been out every night for the last two weeks,' Jacqui

reminded her, but Pacquetta ignored the statistic.

‘Reading is all very well, but it won’t find you a husband.’

Jacqui smiled. Pacquetta’s ambitions for her were pleasantly uncomplicated. She was the one constant in Jacqui’s life. Solid, dependable, warm-hearted, always there when she was needed.

Pacquetta had been Jacqui’s nanny throughout childhood, scolding and encouraging her, rough and affectionate at the same time. After her parents were killed in a car crash, Jacqui had returned to Honfleur, and Pacquetta had followed.

‘What did the inspector want of you?’ Pacquetta asked.

‘He showed me a newspaper article—about the man who was found in the harbour.’

‘Don’t get involved in that business,’ Pacquetta said quietly.

‘Why not?’ Jacqui asked. ‘Have you heard something?’

‘Just rumours.’

Jacqui smiled wickedly. ‘You’re always hearing rumours, Kettie. I think you start them up yourself,’ she said, but the eyes that met hers were dark and troubled.

THEY WERE WAITING for him when he returned to his flat.

Napier put his key to the lock, but the door was open and swung back on its hinges. At first he thought he’d been burgled, but the furniture was undisturbed. The room was dark, and a man leaned against the fireplace, his hands buried in the pockets of his jacket.

‘How did you get in here?’ Napier asked inconsequentially, and as he spoke, the door closed. Glancing round, he saw another figure, taller and younger, take up position behind him.

‘You’ve been interfering with matters that don’t concern you,’ said the first of the intruders.

‘You’re referring to *The Estuary Pilgrim*, I take it. You’ve been sent here by Maurice Lebas.’

‘You will forget about it, Dr Napier,’ he said. ‘This is just a warning, of course, but I recommend you take it.’

‘And if I don’t?’

The signal was imperceptible, a slight movement of the head. The younger of the two picked up a bronze statuette from the desk and brought it down onto the back of Napier’s neck.

The blow came without warning. The room burst open before Napier’s eyes, the shadows exploded into light, and he fell forward without feeling the ground that came up to hit him.

When he came round, the two intruders had left.

Slowly and peacefully he bubbled up towards consciousness.

Gradually realisation flooded back to him and with it came the pain, a sharp insistent ache that throbbed in his head like a heartbeat.

Getting to his feet, he stumbled into the bathroom and put his head under the tap. The shock of the cold water cleared his mind, and he felt a sudden surge of anger.

Taking a towel, he went into the living room and sat down at his desk. He picked up the card on his blotter and dialled the number, drying his hair as he did so.

‘Wallace-Jones,’ said a cautious voice at the other end.

‘Is that Mr Spooner?’

‘Speaking.’

‘Pack your toothbrush, Spooner. We’re going to France.’

## Chapter Five

The Hôtel Delaroche was a large family house that had fallen on hard times. It stood on the crest of the hill above Honfleur at the point where the town dissolved into orchards and wooded lanes. The gates were rusted open, but the high stone wall that enclosed the grounds lent the place a forbidding air of privacy.

Napier and Spooner arrived by taxi. Leaving Spooner to pay the driver, Napier walked up the flight of steps. There was nothing to indicate that this was a hotel. He paused in the doorway. The hall was high-ceilinged and silent. An ornate staircase flowed out into a floor of worn marble. The walls were painted with pale decorations, and the air was heavy with the sweet musk of decayed stone.

In the shadows of the staircase was a young man. He was formally dressed, in a black bow tie and low-cut waistcoat that framed his white shirt. Poised and balanced, he stood with one hand on his hip, a cigarette held vertically between two fingers.

‘Am I right in thinking this is the Hôtel Delaroche?’ Napier asked, his voice breaking the stillness of the room.

The young man nodded and, relaxing his pose, he glided towards him. As he came into the light his face aged by half a century, and with a little shock of surprise Napier realised that he was looking not at a young man, but at a woman.

‘I’m Eugenie Delaroche,’ she said, going round behind the reception desk.

It was the short bobbed hair as much as the clothing that had deceived him. She must have been seventy, yet Napier still found her curiously ambiguous: neither male nor female, old nor young.

Napier gave his name, and she checked it in the ledger. At that moment Spooner appeared in the doorway, a suitcase in one hand and his briefcase in the other.

‘Ah, yes,’ Eugenie breathed, taking down a couple of keys and walking away towards the staircase. ‘Come with me.’

They followed her up the staircase to the second floor, turning down into a broad but dimly lit passage. Unlocking a door, she threw it open and walked inside. The room was large and sparsely furnished, with a chest of drawers and double bed. A clean, washed light fell in through the French windows.

Spooner looked about suspiciously and gave a little groan. Napier followed the direction of his gaze. Hanging on the wall behind him was a painting of a nude girl sprawled across a rumpled bed. It was unmistakably Eugenie.

‘Do you like it?’ she asked. ‘It was painted a long time ago, but I think there’s still a certain resemblance. Don’t you agree?’

Spooner nodded seriously.

The room that Napier had been allocated was across the hall. It was smaller but otherwise identical to Spooner’s. Napier opened the French windows and stepped out onto the balcony. The old medieval town of Honfleur lay below him, the soft-brown tiled roofs piled one on top of the other like slabs of turf. He could make out the long wooden roof of Sainte Catherine’s and the stiletto blade of its spire. Beyond it the estuary stretched away into the distance.

A maid came in and busied herself about the room. ‘How long are you staying?’ she asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ replied Napier, turning round and leaning back on the wrought-iron balcony. ‘A few days, maybe a week.’

‘Only you’ll have to move out of here if Monsieur Delaroche returns,’ she continued, thumping the bolster into position with her arms. ‘This is his dressing room.’

The woman was old and bent but, as she spoke, she looked up at Napier with a smile of unblemished innocence.

Eugenie appeared in the doorway. ‘Are you finished in here, Madeleine?’ she asked, as if speaking to a small child.

The old woman nodded. ‘All finished, all done,’ she croaked, and paddled out of the room.

‘I gather this is your husband’s dressing room,’ Napier said.

‘Is that what she told you?’ Eugenie smiled sadly. ‘Madeleine gets a little confused at times,’ she said, joining him on the balcony. ‘My husband has been dead for many years.’

‘I’m sorry . . .’



Eugenie shook her head and stared out over the estuary. 'It was not important,' she murmured. 'A marriage of convenience.' For a few moments she stood motionless, her gaze fixed on the distant horizon. 'I hear you know Honfleur well.'

'I've been here several times before,' Napier admitted.

'So what was it that brought you to this hotel?' Her manner, as with everything she said, was forthright.

'We were hoping to learn something about the death of Charles Barnabas,' Napier replied.

Eugenie tilted back her head. 'Ah. I thought as much.'

SPOONER LOOKED AROUND, examining the general layout of the museum, and then, going over to one wall, he began to inspect the paintings in detail. Bending forward, he quizzed each canvas through steel-rimmed spectacles.

'It's odd,' he observed. 'This place calls itself the Boudin Museum, but as far as I can see, there are no pictures by him.'

'No, that's right,' said Napier. 'It was named after Boudin because he was born here. It's got everyone else who ever painted in Honfleur, on the other hand.' He tapped the name placard of a picture with the back of his finger. The screw was loose, and to his horror the placard fell out of the wall onto the floor.

He bent down to pick it up. As he reached out, he heard the click of approaching footsteps, and a pair of smart Italian shoes appeared beside his hand. He glanced up to see Jacqui Fontenay towering above him.

Very slowly Napier straightened up and presented her with the little placard. 'I believe this is yours,' he murmured.

Jacqui accepted it gravely, swept him with her cool grey eyes and turned away to Spooner, who completed the introductions.

'I'm sorry to keep you waiting,' she said. 'Shall we go up to my office?' She led the way, politely answering the questions that Spooner put to her. Her legs were shapely, Napier noticed, and the hem of her skirt amplified the casual sway of her hips.

'Have you seen this?' she asked, pausing before a framed canvas no larger than an envelope. It was a view of Honfleur harbour on a blustery day. 'It's our most recent acquisition.'

'Charming,' diagnosed Spooner. 'And who is the artist?'

'It's by Jongkind,' she told him. Turning round, she added, 'That is unless Dr Napier wants to tell us that it's a fake.'

There was no humour in this remark, and in the depths of her eyes Napier detected a glint of hostility.



Her office was small and flooded with afternoon light. Notices and posters of recent exhibitions were pinned to the wall.

'Is it true you think there is a connection between *The Estuary Pilgrim* and that poor man who was found in the harbour the other day?' Jacqui asked, opening the window.

'I think it's a coincidence that should be looked into.'

'I don't understand you, Dr Napier. Two months ago you assured the world that this painting was genuine; now, on the flimsiest piece of evidence, you want to change your mind. Why is that?'

Napier knew that she wasn't going to like what he was about to say. 'I find the discovery of the picture a little too convenient for my liking. Quite frankly I'm wondering whether your article in the paper didn't inadvertently create the opportunity for a fake.'

Napier's voice was soft, almost apologetic, but to Jacqui his words were like a slap in the face.

'You have no proof of this,' she flashed.

'I'm hoping to find it while I'm here in Honfleur.'

'You sound as if you want it to be a fake.'

'On the contrary,' replied Napier, 'I'd much prefer it to be the real thing. I've written about that picture so often—'

'So I believe,' Jacqui cut in. 'Unfortunately, I've never read one of your books.'

The lie came out before she'd even realised it. She could think of no reason for it other than she wanted to snub him. He was so very sure of himself, this John Napier, used to getting his own way, particularly with women. Certainly he had charm—his smile was gentle, and his eyes had a pleasant way of crinkling when he talked—but she had known men with more.

Spooner mustered his schoolboy French. 'I was wondering whether we could look over the information you put together: the notes and documents you refer to in your article.'

Jacqui smiled. 'Of course,' she said, forcing herself to relax. 'The file is at home at present, but I could bring it in tomorrow.'

'That would be most kind of you.'

Jacqui accompanied them downstairs. 'I'll see you in the morning, then,' she said, giving Napier her hand in parting.

They studied each other briefly in the instant of contact.

'We are staying at the Hôtel Delaroche, should you wish to alter the arrangement,' Spooner informed her.

A glint of amusement passed across her face.

'It doesn't seem to be very well known,' he added.

'No,' she agreed, 'but it has quite a reputation nonetheless.'

NAPIER WAS DISGUSTED with himself.

Line by line he went over the confrontation with Jacqui, and however he looked at it, he found himself at fault. The discovery of the painting was important to her, and in a few tactless words he had threatened to belittle the achievement.

He took a sip of lager and put the glass back on its mat, promising himself he'd be more considerate when he saw her in the morning.

The café around him was as busy as a beehive. Yellow umbrellas puddled the tables with shadow, and beyond them the harbour shimmered in the sunshine. A band was playing on the quayside—a saxophone and an accordion, accompanied by a dented tuba.

In front of a crowd a juggler was fanning small coloured balls into the air. He was a diminutive figure dressed in bright red trousers and the long flat shoes of a clown. A crumpled top hat was perched on his upturned head, and all the time he performed he harangued the spectators who'd gathered round him.

At that moment Spooner appeared, picking his way through the crowd, briefcase in hand. Catching sight of him, in his black jacket and striped trousers, the juggler dropped his act, the balls falling back into his hand.

'Excuse me, monsieur,' he cried, lifting his hat and placing it over his heart. 'I hadn't realised there was a funeral today.'

The audience tittered. Spooner glanced about himself, grasped that he was the butt of this humour and hurried on.

The juggler stepped out into his path and bowed. The top hat rolled down his arm and landed upended in his hand.

Spooner had no alternative but to drop a coin in. The juggler thanked him, tapped him on the arm and with a quick, caressing movement of his palm removed Spooner's watch.

'*Merci, monsieur,*' he murmured, dropping into another low bow. 'And do you have the time, by any chance?'

Instinctively Spooner felt in his waistcoat pocket and stood frozen as he realised what had happened. The juggler lifted the watch from Spooner's collar and held it up, dangling and turning on its gold chain, for everyone to see.

'*Pardon, monsieur.*' He grinned as he handed it back.

A burst of applause sprang from the crowd. With unruffled dignity Spooner took back his watch and retreated into the safety of the café.

'Incorrigible young man,' he puffed, sitting down beside Napier.

Napier nodded his agreement. The sight of Spooner being unburdened of his timepiece had quite restored his spirits.

'How did you get on with the police?' he asked.

'Well enough. Chief Inspector Chaumière was most accommodating, but he doesn't believe there is any connection between the painting and the murder.'

'He may be right, of course.' Napier's mind drifted back to the memory of tawny gold hair and eyes as cool as the dawn sky. 'In which case we can make our apologies and all go home.'

'Not yet,' replied Spooner, picking up his briefcase and unlocking the clips. 'While I was there I picked up Barnabas's personal effects. There was nothing of great interest except this.' He took out the German Iron Cross and handed it to Napier. The medal had been treated roughly over the years. The black-enamelled surface was faintly clouded, and the blade of its edges was blunt and serrated with small nicks. Engraved on the back was the name D. SCHWARTZ.

Reaching forward, Spooner tapped the name. 'This says we stay.'

They left the café and walked along the quayside. The water below them was rainbowed with motor oil and the lazy ripples blinked back the sun. As they reached the old customs house Napier pointed towards the outer harbour. 'What's that remind you of?' he asked.

Spooner consulted the view for a moment. 'Why, it's the setting of *The Estuary Pilgrim*.'

'Almost unchanged from the day it was painted.'

'And to think that Monet stood right here while he was working.'

'It was not only Monet who stood here,' Napier replied. 'Your forger would have also. Anyone forging *The Estuary Pilgrim* would be bound to come here to check his facts, make sure he'd got all his colours right before starting work.'

They walked on and parted at the steps of the hotel.

Napier wandered to the back of the building and stood for a few minutes gazing at the overgrown gardens. Near a brick wall he noticed a stone statue. He walked over to it, following a narrow pathway that had been mown in the long grass.

It was a little wood nymph, set high on a pedestal, the stonework green with lichen. Behind it was a garden seat. Napier sat down and let his eyes close, and the sunlight gilded his lashes.

A voice broke into his daydream. 'Do I disturb you?'

Napier looked up with a start. Eugenie Delaroche was standing before him, a dark silhouette against the brightness.

'It's pleasant here, isn't it?' she said, gazing up at the little stone figure. 'I hear you're an art historian, Dr Napier.'

'That's right.'

'Come,' she said, holding out her hand. 'I've something to show you.' The gesture was at once inviting and intimate, as though they



were friends of old. Skirting the overgrown lawns, she led the way to a structure in a corner of the garden. It was short and round, with a slate dunce's cap for a roof. Eugenie went inside.

The circular room was unfurnished, the floor laid with rough boards. Slumped against the wall was a dishevelled figure in baggy blue trousers and a vest. A bottle of wine was wedged in the cleft of his legs, and his hands rested on its neck.

Eugenie paused in the doorway. 'Haven't you something better to be doing with your time?' she asked impatiently.

He grunted a reply to himself and lumbered to his feet, stuffed the bottle into one pocket and left.

'That's Albert,' Eugenie said. 'He mows the lawns around here.'

Napier ducked through the doorway and looked about. The place was some sort of artist's studio. Several easels stood by the window. A kitchen table was littered with palettes and paint tubes. Small, brightly coloured canvases at various stages of completion were propped against the table legs.

'I give one or two artists a room for the summer in exchange for some pictures. I sell them to the galleries around the harbour, and believe me, they earn more than I could ever get for a hotel room.'

Napier walked over to the window. 'I'm told that this hasn't always been a hotel.'

'That's true. It was a brothel.'

The abruptness of her answer made him turn.

Eugenie stood in the centre of the room, her hands thrust deep into her pockets. There was a sadness about her, Napier had noticed, a sense of withdrawn melancholy.

'What made you change it into a hotel?'

'That was decided for me,' she replied, 'after the war. There were complaints to the council and the brothel was closed.' She came over to the window and leaned against the sill. 'You see, it had made no difference to me who came here. The Germans were men like any others, lonely and missing their homes.'

'And after the war you were branded as a collaborator?'

She nodded. 'They took everything I owned: furniture, paintings, even the curtains off the walls.' Her words came in a sudden rush. 'I was left with nothing but the carcass of a house.'

In the depths of her eyes Napier saw a hatred that had festered there for forty years. It flowed from her, vital and tangible, a dark, malignant presence that filled the room.

'Did a German officer called Schwartz ever come here?' he asked. 'Dietrich Schwartz?'

'Maybe,' she replied with a shrug. 'I don't remember their names. Come now, we must go; it's almost dinnertime.'

They walked back to the house in silence. On the steps Eugenie suddenly stopped, and turning to Napier, she said, 'I was lying back there, you realise.'

'Lying?'

'I knew Dietrich Schwartz. He was nothing—a little postman—forever scuttling about after his seniors.'

'Do you know what he was doing here in Honfleur?'

Eugenie shook her short-cropped hair. 'The only thing I remember about Schwartz was that he had the most extraordinary taste in women . . .' Madeleine appeared in the doorway, mumbling and crowing and in need of instructions.

Eugenie's thoughts returned to the present. She murmured an apology at the interruption and went inside.

## Chapter Six

Jacqui was talking on the phone, the receiver buried in the depths of her hair, when Napier arrived at her office. She wore a light grey dress, simple but well tailored.

She looked chic and invulnerable.

Reaching out her arm, she pointed towards a chair. Napier obeyed the command and sat. The conversation came to an end and she put the phone down.

'Good morning, Dr Napier,' she said, studying him gravely. 'I see you haven't brought your little friend with you today.'

'He's in the Hôtel de Ville, going through the archives.'

'I see. I've brought the documents you wanted to see.' She opened a drawer and pulled out a loose-leaf file, which she handed across to Napier.

He laid it on the desk and flicked through the pages. There were fifty or more photocopied documents, many embossed with the stylised spread eagle of the Third Reich. Alongside each document was a neatly typed translation.

'Did you make these translations yourself?' Napier asked.

Jacqui nodded, then leaned across the desk and began turning the pages, tilting her head to read the words upside-down.

'Let me show you some interesting items. This first section is from General von Eichendorff's headquarters here in Honfleur.'

Napier leaned forward, just touching the aura of her scent,

and examined the pages she held open for him.

'Some of the references are rather vague,' she told him, 'but in one or two cases the pictures are mentioned by name. Then in this second part I've added some eyewitness accounts of the ambush.'

Napier stole a glance at her as she spoke, admiring the finely sculptured planes of her cheeks and nose. Her hair was radiant in the morning sun, casting warm lights on honey-coloured skin.

She was warm and desirable and yet somehow untouchable. Napier was filled with a strong but uncomfortable sensation of possession; it was as though she belonged to someone. But she was evidently not married: the only ring she wore was a simple gold band engraved with a family crest.

For the next half-hour she went over the documents, explaining each one in turn. At the end she had added a number of newspaper articles covering the discovery of the painting.

'I'd no idea it received such publicity,' Napier said.

'Oh, yes,' said Jacqui, 'and there'll be a great deal more if it turns out to be a fake. But, then, isn't that what you want?' The glint of hostility was there once more, a sharp drawn blade in her voice.

'I just want to be sure before I commit myself,' he said carefully.

Jacqui leaned forward. 'Everything I've shown you today, everything you discovered in your own researches proves the picture is genuine. So why do you insist it's a fake?'

'I really don't know,' replied Napier. 'When I was first shown the painting, I thought something was wrong, but the more I tried to discover what it was, the less certain I became.' He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

The smile was infectious, disarming, but Jacqui made no response. She looked at him in silence, letting his words run on.

'The only tangible piece of information that we have found is a single name—Dietrich Schwartz. Wherever we go, that name seems to crop up.'

'The general's adjutant?' For the first time he had Jacqui's interest. 'But Dr Napier, Schwartz died over forty years ago.'

'And *The Estuary Pilgrim*, if it is a fake, would have been made in the last few months.'

'Exactly.'

'The two don't seem to fit together, do they?' he said. 'But that's why we need to know more about Dietrich Schwartz.'

Jacqui's manner thawed a bit. 'You think this is important?'

'I'm certain that he's the key to this whole affair.' Picking up the file, Napier leafed through the pages. 'Look at these documents;

nearly every one is either to him, or from him, or signed by him in the general's absence.'

She had come to a decision. 'I may know someone who can help you,' she said. 'He's an expert in the history of this district, especially the war years.'

'Could I meet him?'

'I'll see what I can do.'

Napier left a few minutes later with an assurance that she would be in touch as soon as she'd rung her friend.

That evening, when he and Spooner returned from dinner, they were stopped in the hall by Eugenie Delaroche.

'There's a message for you, Dr Napier,' she announced, materialising out of the shadows. 'The Fontenay girl rang while you were out to say that you're invited to lunch tomorrow. She's going to pick you up around midday.'

THE SHED WAS A SIMPLE wooden lean-to. It lay in the crook of the garden wall, half buried in undergrowth. There was a movement inside. Napier stood in the entrance, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. He had been left to his own devices for the morning and was giving the hotel grounds a thorough tour of inspection.

Standing in the gloomy interior was a dishevelled figure whom he recognised as Albert. He was bending over the cylinder block of an engine, his arms black with oil. A bottle of wine stood on the workbench amid the debris of machinery. He looked up and gave a grunt of recognition as Napier came in.

'That's a Lister diesel, isn't it?' Napier asked, drawing closer and inspecting the ancient engine.

Albert gave a repeat performance of his grunt.

'I see it's water-cooled. Does it belong to a boat?'

Albert regarded Napier with rather more interest. He was an unkempt-looking individual with a black moustache that sprouted from the base of wide-flared nostrils.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'My boat.' He put the bottle to his mouth and took a long pull at the wine.

'What sort of boat is it?' Napier asked.

Albert looked at him in disbelief. 'It's a fishing boat.' He jabbed a thick thumb into his vest. 'I'm a fisherman.'

'Ah,' said Napier. 'I'm sorry, I didn't know that.'

'My father was a fisherman,' he said earnestly. 'My brother, my grandfather . . . I have the sea in my blood.'

Added to the alcohol already in his veins, this gave Albert a

considerable liquid content, but Napier kept this observation to himself. 'I thought you were the gardener here,' he said.

'I do a little gardening,' he allowed. 'Part-time.'

'How long have you worked at the hotel?'

Albert made calculations. 'About fifteen years.'

'You must have been in Eugenie's service longer than anyone.'

'Except old Madeleine. She's been here for ever.'

'Not during the war, surely?'

Albert nodded. 'Even then,' he grunted.

'Really. I must have a word with her about it.'

'You won't get anything. She's screwy in the head.' He revolved one finger by his ear to clarify the condition.

There was a sound outside.

A daffodil-yellow Citroën had parked in front of the house. Jacqui jumped out and caught sight of Napier.

'You got my message?' she asked, walking across the gravel and shaking his hand.

'I did.'

Jacqui went back to the car and opened the door on the driver's side. He slipped into the passenger seat beside her.

Taking the coastal route, they headed out of town. Jacqui drove hard and skilfully, frequently changing gear as they climbed the headland above Honfleur. For some time they drove in silence.

As they were coming down into a village the girl turned to him and said, 'I think I should explain where we are going.' She slowed the Citroën as she spoke, indicated to the left and swung in through a pair of high wrought-iron gates. 'The man you are about to meet is my guardian.'

Before them lay a magnificent chateau, its ornate sculptured façade rising above terraces and formal gardens. The stonework was mellow with age, the high mansard roof pierced with dormer windows and sheathed in tiles of a soft green-grey tone.

'He seems to do pretty well for himself,' Napier murmured. 'Did you say he was a historian?'

'No. He's an art dealer. I think you'll find him interesting.'

They parked in the shade of the front wall and climbed out. Jacqui's guardian had seen them arrive and now stood on the terrace waiting to greet them. He was a tall, handsome figure in a silver-grey suit and silk cravat. Jacqui ran up the steps towards him and, reaching up on tiptoe, she kissed him on both cheeks.

He accepted this display of affection with good grace and then, turning to Napier, he held out his hand.



'Welcome to my house, Dr Napier,' he said in unflawed English. 'My name is Rupert Ashford.'

Ashford's smile as they shook hands was welcoming. 'I'm so glad you were able to come at such short notice.' Turning to Jacqui, he asked, 'Can you stay long?'

'For a little while,' she told him as they walked towards the house. 'I must be back at the museum by three.'

'Ah, well, that gives us two hours,' he said, taking her arm. 'I've asked Louis to serve lunch in the dining room, but I thought we'd have drinks on the terrace beforehand. We must make the most of the weather while it lasts.' Ashford's whole manner was gracious, almost deferential, but Napier couldn't help noticing that the expression in his eyes was curiously dull and lifeless.

He ushered them through a tall glass-panelled door into a hallway that was majestic in its scale and simplicity. A carved staircase rose around two walls up to a high gallery. Ashford led the way to a terrace on the far side of the house.

Standing on a table by the wall was an ice bucket and a silver tray with three fluted glasses. Ashford drew a champagne bottle from its container and checked the label before stripping away the wire cage. The cork came out in his hand with a dry, gaseous report, and he filled the first glass, handing it to Napier. Jacqui accepted her glass with a quick smile of thanks and, taking it across the terrace, she gazed down at the gardens. Ashford watched her for a moment and then, turning back to Napier, said, 'I've been in Paris for the last few days, catching up on recent events. There's so much on at present. Tell me, what did you make of the new Cézanne exhibition?'

'I can't say I've seen it.'

'Really? You surprise me, Dr Napier.'

Ashford studied him with his flat, unfocused stare, and it was only then, with a little shock of awareness, that Napier appreciated the cause of this expression: Ashford was blind in one eye. The socket contained a glass replica, identical in shape and colour to the other, but quite unable to move.

'I haven't been in Paris since August,' Napier told him, covering the hesitation that had followed his discovery.

A stocky figure dressed in a black suit appeared in the doorway at that moment to announce that lunch was ready.

'I must show you round the house before you leave, Dr Napier,' Ashford commented as they crossed the hall. 'It's not the most important chateau in Normandy, but I think it has a few points that will merit your attention.'

They came into the dining room of panelled oak. One wall was dominated by a cavernous stone fireplace. Three places had been laid on a table that could have seated fifty.

'The house was built in the early eighteenth century by the Duc de Montreuil,' Ashford continued, touching the back of Jacqui's chair as she sat down, before taking his place at the head of the table. 'It's said he kept both a wife and a mistress here for twenty years without either of them ever discovering the other.'

'How very convenient for all concerned,' Napier said.

'Not that I can believe it,' Ashford added. 'There's not a floor in the place that doesn't creak.'

Lunch arrived swiftly and silently in porcelain dishes—a light mousse of salmon moulded to the shape of a fish, crisp slices of toast with curls of butter. Ashford talked easily and fluently, describing the alterations that had taken place to the house over the years. Throughout the meal the full force of his conversation was directed at Napier, but over and again Ashford's attention had wandered back to Jacqui. She appeared to fascinate him. She seemed subdued in Ashford's presence, very different from the self-assured girl Napier had met in the museum.

Leaning forward, Ashford stroked her arm with a quick caressing gesture. 'What are you doing this coming Saturday?' he asked.

Jacqui paused and thought for a moment. 'Oh, I'm having lunch with the Descamps.'

Ashford's voice dropped a tone. 'I'd rather you were here that day. I have a business acquaintance coming to stay for the weekend. I'll need you here to entertain him.'

'But it's Gabrielle's birthday.'

Ashford held her gaze with his unblinking stare.

For a moment Napier thought she was going to resist. But then she looked down at her plate and said, 'Of course, Rupert.'

Ashford smiled. Getting to his feet, he walked over to the sideboard, and picking up a bottle of wine that stood ready, he filled Jacqui's glass. As he did so, he stroked her hair.

Once again Napier was filled with the disturbing sensation of possession. It was quite clear that Ashford wanted him to understand that Jacqui was his. She belonged to him, part of his property, as much as the great house he owned.

Napier pretended not to notice. 'How long have you been living here?' he asked innocently.

'Almost fifteen years now,' Ashford replied. He walked round the table and filled Napier's glass as he spoke. 'The contents of the cellars

came with the place. This wine we're drinking today, for example. I'm sure you'll recognise it.'

'I'm afraid I know very little about wine,' Napier replied.

'Taste it,' Ashford ordered pleasantly, holding the bottle out of sight. Napier realised that he was being put on trial.

Putting the glass to his lips, he tested the flavour; it was as rich and warm as new-mown hay. He guessed. 'It's a claret.'

'Certainly it's claret,' Ashford agreed, returning to his seat. 'The question is, which claret?'

Napier shrugged. 'I've no idea.'

The smile was suddenly condescending. 'You disappoint me, Dr Napier. I'd have thought a man of your taste would take an interest in wine. Do you not consider it an art form?'

'Not really.'

The dull eyes studied him. 'And why should you?' he cried, the warmth flooding back into his voice. 'You're an expert on paintings, not a wine merchant. Besides, we're wasting time.' He sat back in his chair. 'Jacqui tells me you're looking for information on the German occupation of Honfleur.'

'That's right,' Napier agreed, adjusting to this sudden shift in the conversation.

'There was a name . . .' Ashford turned to Jacqui for help.

'Schwartz,' she reminded him. 'Dietrich Schwartz.'

'Ah, yes indeed—the general's adjutant.'

'Does the name mean anything to you?' Napier asked.

Ashford pondered for a moment. 'I can't say it does. I must have seen Schwartz in the wake of the general, but I must admit I can't put a face to the name.'

Napier grabbed the remark. 'You saw von Eichendorff?'

'Oh, yes,' he said lightly, 'on several occasions. Everyone in Honfleur did. But I can't claim that I ever had more than a fleeting glimpse of him. He was not an easy man to approach socially.' This expression seemed to amuse him, and he smiled quietly to himself.

'I hadn't realised you were in Honfleur during the war.'

'Rupert was a member of the SOE,' Jacqui put in, a touch of pride in her voice.

'So you worked with the Resistance?' Napier was suddenly intrigued. 'You didn't have anything to do with the bombing of the convoy at Criquetot, did you?'

'No,' Ashford said. 'Criquetot was well away from my sphere of influence. Added to which I was hiding from the Gestapo at that time. I'd recently escaped from one of their jails.' He changed the

subject. 'I've heard that you think *The Estuary Pilgrim* is a fake.'

'It's a possibility,' Napier replied. 'What do you think?'

'I've no idea,' Ashford replied quickly. 'But I do know that pictures are rather like English criminals—innocent until proved guilty. When you say *The Estuary Pilgrim* is genuine, the public will take your word for it, but if you suggest it's a fake, you'll need to prove it. Where are you going to find that proof?'

It occurred to Napier to tell him of Barnabas, but he allowed Ashford to score his point, and said, 'I don't know.'

'That's what I feared,' Ashford continued calmly.

At his suggestion they went next door to a small study lined with leather-bound books. Jacqui began pouring out the coffee that stood ready on a side table.

'Who's behind all this, do you think?' Ashford asked, stirring his cup with a diminutive silver spoon. 'I mean, if there's a forgery, there must be a culprit.'

'In that case I would suggest Maurice Lebas,' Napier replied. 'He has both the means and the motive. Added to which, he has already tried to warn me off the case.'

'Has he?' Ashford studied him speculatively. 'Not that it surprises me. Maurice has the manners of a guttersnipe.'

'You know him?'

'Slightly,' Ashford replied. 'I shouldn't stand in his way, Dr Napier. He'd make a formidable opponent.'

Louis appeared between them at that moment. He was a short, compact man, with a balding head set on a thick neck, and looked more like a bouncer at a nightclub than a butler. He held a silver tray in his hands.

'A glass of dessert wine, Dr Napier?' Ashford enquired.

Napier took the offered glass and touched it to his lips.

'Ah, now this I do know,' he said after a moment's thought. Placing the glass on the marble mantelpiece, he inspected the wine closely. 'Beaumes de Venise,' he diagnosed.

'It is indeed.'

Napier put his face closer to the glass and examined it once more. 'And the year is almost certainly . . . nineteen sixty-five.'

Ashford paused, his expression wary. 'Right again, Dr Napier,' he said softly. 'For a man who knows nothing about wine, you seem to be remarkably well informed.'

Napier was modest. 'I'm not at all. It was simply a question of position.'

The implication was lost on Ashford.

'By putting the glass on the mantelpiece and looking from this angle,' Napier explained politely, pointing across the room, 'I can see the reflection of the label in the mirror.'

Ashford's head snapped round to where the opened bottle stood on the sideboard and then back to the mirror above the mantelpiece.

'Art historians don't have much in the way of taste,' Napier continued, 'but they do have very good eyes.'

Ashford turned and faced him.

The false eye retained its benevolent stare; the other had grown small and hard, fixed in its intensity. For a split second it burned with a fierce white anger, and then, as quickly as a light bulb blowing, it was gone again. The single eye warmed and a glint of humour broke the stillness of his face.

'What a very amusing young man you are, Dr Napier,' he murmured. 'I must remember that in future.'

Jacqui stood watching them. 'I think we should be going,' she said hastily, glancing down at her watch. 'It's already two fifteen.'

Ashford led them out into the fresh air and autumn sunshine.

'I hear you're an art dealer,' Napier said as they walked.

'Does that surprise you?'

'In a way. I didn't see a single painting in the house.'

'Ah, but you didn't look in the right places,' Ashford remarked. 'As it happens, I have a great number of pictures, but they're all upstairs. You must come again, Dr Napier. I'll show them to you.'

'That would be most interesting.'

'Why not Saturday?' Ashford said. 'I have a few guests coming in for drinks around five.'

'I shall look forward to it,' Napier replied.

'Good. I'll have Louis pick you up from your hotel, and Jacqui can take you back in her little casserole.' He nodded down to where the Citroën stood in the drive. 'I've offered to buy her something more dashing,' Ashford continued, 'but she won't hear of it.'

'It's a very smart car. I like it just the way it is,' she said lightly, and reaching up, she kissed him on both cheeks, thanked him for lunch and then, turning to Napier, added, 'We must hurry now.'

THEY DROVE IN SILENCE. Jacqui had never seen Rupert behave like that before. He'd been on edge from the moment they'd arrived, and when Napier had read the wine label in the mirror, she'd thought he might hit him.

Admittedly Rupert had deserved that. He'd been needling Napier with his knowledge of wine all through lunch.



Still, she hadn't expected Napier to fight back in that way. It was quite a revelation. Beneath that easy-going English manner of his, he was surprisingly tough. She stole a glance at him out of the corner of her eye as they breasted the hill above Honfleur.

Napier was gazing out through the open window at the estuary below them, absorbed in thoughts of his own.

'You didn't like him,' she said flatly.

He looked at her in surprise. 'Was it that obvious?'

'Painfully.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude.' His eyes assumed their usual slightly mocking smile. 'At the same time, I think it's fair to say that he didn't particularly like me either.' Napier returned to the view from the window. 'How did he lose his eye?' he asked as the car bounced into the outskirts of Honfleur.

'He was tortured by the Gestapo.'

'Here in Honfleur?'

'I think so,' she said, 'but I must admit I don't know exactly how it happened—he doesn't like to speak of it.'

'And he managed to escape? Ingenious fellow.'

'He's treated with great respect in the district,' she told him. 'The older generation still think of him as a war hero.'

They reached the gates of the hotel. Jacqui parked the car in the street and jumped out to say goodbye.

'Will I see you again?' he asked.

'I'm sure you will. This is a small town.'

'Maybe we could have dinner one night?'

She shook her head. 'I'm afraid I'm rather busy this week.'

She saw the disappointment flash in his eyes and felt a twinge of conscience. This was the second time she'd snubbed him for no apparent reason. He must find her very rude.

'It's just that I'm only here for a few days . . .' he began.

'Rupert invited you on Saturday. I'll see you there.'

They shook hands. Napier murmured a few words in parting and then turned to go.

Jacqui hesitated. She had a sudden desire to stop him, to talk to him about Rupert, to tell him something of her own thoughts, but Napier was already walking away. The moment had passed.

LONG AFTER the daffodil-yellow car had disappeared down the drive, Ashford remained on the terrace, staring at the spot where it had vanished out of his sight.

Louis stood a respectful distance behind him.

'He's dangerous, Louis,' Ashford said in a distant voice. 'What do you know about him?'

'Only scraps at present. He's been in Honfleur for three days, staying with Eugenie Delaroche.'

'How about his companion—what's he up to?'

'He's been going through the archives.'

'He won't find much in there,' Ashford turned his attention back to Napier. 'How did he come to meet Jacqui?'

'He went to see her at the museum.'

'That damned article of hers, I suppose. She hasn't shown any interest in him, has she?'

'Not that I've heard of.'

'Good. We don't want the silly girl getting any ideas into her head.' Ashford turned to face him. 'I want him watched, Louis,' he ordered. 'Whatever he does, wherever he goes, I want to hear of it—do you understand me?'

Louis gave a single quick nod of his head.

'I think we should keep an eye on Dr Napier.'

SPOONER AND NAPIER had spent over an hour on the quayside, going from one easel to the next, watching the different artists at work. There were over a dozen of them that day, all strung out around the harbour, busily painting the same scene.

Spooner expected Napier to dismiss the paintings as cheap and commercial, but each one in turn had something that interested him. Whether he actually liked them was impossible to tell.

'They're as cunning as monkeys,' he said when Spooner put this question to him. 'They catch an effect of light as quickly as we catch cold, but none of them could have faked *The Estuary Pilgrim*, if that's what you're thinking.'

'No?'

Napier shook his head. 'Unfortunately not. The technical problems would be far beyond the scope of this lot.'

They leaned against the harbour wall. The tide was out, and fishing boats lay stranded in the mud, the painted hulls resting on their plump bilges. Perched on the hatch of one boat, his feet set against the sharp incline of the deck, was a lone figure.

Napier called down to him. 'How's the engine running?'

The man looked up suspiciously. Giving a grunt, he lumbered to his feet and began to climb the iron ladder.

'It's going pretty good,' he said as his head appeared over the harbour wall beside them.

'You're not going out, then?'

'I can't,' he replied. 'The boat's stuck on the mud.' The man settled his weight on the parapet, his belly pressing comfortably against the stone wall, like a ship's fender.

'This is Albert,' Napier explained.

Spooner bobbed his head in introduction. 'Couldn't the channel be dredged in some way?'

'It is,' Albert replied. 'Every bloody year they have a go at it, but it's no use. There's mud now and there always will be. One day the harbour will just silt up and that'll be the end of it.'

Spooner stared across the water and tried to picture this gloomy prophecy.

A flash of colour on the far shore caught his attention. Walking down the quayside opposite them was the slim figure of a girl. The thick mane of golden hair was unmistakable, even at this distance. It was that young lioness from the museum.

Spooner glanced at Napier out of the corner of his eye to see if he had noticed her.

He had. His mood darkened, as though a shadow had passed over him. Spooner had no idea what had passed between those two. Ever since Napier had returned from lunch at her guardian's house he had been unusually silent. Spooner didn't know what to say. Women were an alien territory to him.

Jacqui had paused by a waterside café and was scanning the tables. A figure at a far table had half lifted himself from his seat and beckoned her. Jacqui pushed through the café towards him.

Napier was suddenly alert.

'You don't have any binoculars, do you?' he asked Albert.

He nodded. Pushing himself away from the harbour wall, he clambered down onto his boat, rummaged about and emerged with a brass telescope. 'This any good?' he asked.

'Perfect.'

Napier directed the telescope in towards the café. He held it there for a moment and then handed it over to Spooner. 'Take a look at the man she's talking with,' he ordered.

Gingerly Spooner set the telescope against his eye. Jacqui was sitting with her back to them, her elbows set on the table. Her companion's head was held low, as though he were speaking confidentially, and he was gesticulating freely with one hand.

Spooner was able to make out the man's features but didn't recognise him. Turning to Napier he asked, 'You know him?'

'Certainly,' he replied. 'It's Maurice Lebas.'

## Chapter Seven

The trees were beginning to turn, Jacqui noticed as she accelerated up the drive to the chateau. She parked in her usual place below the terrace and jumped out, glancing at her watch. It was twelve forty. She'd set off later than she'd intended.

The hallway was deserted. She ran up the stairs.

The double doors of the upper gallery stood open and a murmur of voices filtered out onto the landing. Jacqui touched her waist and hair in a quick instinctive gesture, checking her appearance. She'd put on a black cocktail dress for the occasion, light and flimsy, cut high above the knee. Brushing a smile onto her face, she went in.

There were a dozen or more guests in the room, grouped round the fireplace, halfway down the long gallery. As she drew close, Ashford turned towards her, questioning her late arrival with a slight lift of his brow. She kissed him quickly and, without apologising, turned to the couple nearest her, a quiet, urbane pair.

'Of course Deauville isn't fashionable at this time of the year . . .'  
the woman was saying.

They were clients of Rupert's—a property dealer and his wife, who were staying on the coast for the winter.

'But still it's very beautiful in the autumn,' Jacqui replied, engaging them with her dazzling smile. She turned to the group next to her, drawing them into the conversation.

Within a few minutes Jacqui was the centre of attention.

She was playing a part, she realised, but it didn't really matter. Rupert wanted her to behave this way.

And he seemed pleased by her performance. Coming and standing behind her, he ran his hand down her back until it rested on her hip. She turned and looked up at him.

'Come, my dear,' he said softly. 'Meet our guest of honour.'

He propelled her through the crowd towards a figure in a cream-white suit who lounged against the marble fireplace.

'This is Enrique de la Pena,' Ashford announced as he presented her, 'an old and dear friend of mine.'

Enrique took her offered hand in both of his, holding the palm and the wrist as though he were checking the value of her ring. 'It's a pleasure to meet you.'

'Enrique and I used to do business together.'

'Are you able to stay long?' Jacqui asked politely.

His eyes frisked over her. 'Alas, no,' he replied. 'I'm just passing

through. Had I known who my hostess was to be I might have contrived to stay a little longer.' Raising her hand to his lips, he kissed it slowly and deliberately before returning it to her.

He wore too much gold, Jacqui noticed: cuff links as large as walnuts, rings on three fingers and a thick gold watch.

'I was showing Enrique one of my drawings,' Ashford put in, indicating a small framed pastel on an easel by the wall.

'Oh, you've brought out the little Degas,' Jacqui cried. 'I'm so glad. Do you like paintings?' she asked Enrique.

'Of course,' he replied, without looking at it. 'I admire anything of beauty.' The innuendo was intentional and laboured.

Jacqui wondered which country he came from. The name sounded Spanish, but it was impossible to tell from his accent. His skin was sallow and slightly unhealthy-looking, his expression sensual. She could feel his eyes searching her, touching her as she spoke.

'Are you something to do with the art world?' Jacqui asked.

'Not directly.'

'But you've been involved with Rupert's business?'

'Only in financial terms.'

Jacqui realised that she knew very little about Rupert's affairs. He owned galleries in most of the major capitals of Europe, but she had no idea of how they were operated.

'So you provided the financial backing for his galleries?'

'In the early years.'

He seemed disinclined to say more. Jacqui pressed him, but he wasn't going to be drawn on the subject.

At lunch Jacqui took her place at the table. Enrique sat down on her right, but he didn't seem inclined to speak. Instead he ate industriously, frequently mopping his lips with the white damask napkin.

As soon as the meal was over, Ashford took his guests out into the garden. Jacqui made excuses and ran up to her room. She no longer lived at the chateau, but she kept a few clothes there for occasions such as these. She tied back her hair and changed into her riding clothes, then headed downstairs.

Enrique was waiting for her on the landing.

'Ah!' he exclaimed. 'I see you're going riding.' His eyes ran down over her tight white breeches in satisfaction. 'You're just the person I need at this moment,' he said, taking her by the arm and drawing her into the gallery. 'I was admiring this little picture of Rupert's, but I know so little about art.' He positioned her in front of the Degas. 'Is it a watercolour?' he asked.

'No, a pastel.'



'Ah, now how can you tell that so easily?'

'Pastels are like coloured chalks,' she explained obligingly. 'They're much drier-looking than watercolour.'

His hand slipped round her waist. She twisted away with a little smile of reproval. 'I'd rather you didn't.'

'As you like.' Standing back, his voice became businesslike. 'I'm travelling to the South of France later this week,' he said. 'I'll be there for a month, maybe more. Why don't you join me?'

'I don't think that would be a very good idea, would it? I hardly know you.'

He drew in close again. 'I don't think that need worry us,' he murmured. 'There must be things a girl like you needs. I'm certain we can come to some arrangement.'

His voice was low and urgent now, his lips so close that she could feel his breath on her face. He ran his arms round her shoulders, down the curve of her back, drawing her into himself, his hands clinging to her like wet leaves.

A wave of anger welled up in her. Putting her forearms against his shirtfront, she pushed him away. For a moment they struggled together, and then Enrique's grip broke and he stepped back.

He straightened his tie. 'I'm sorry,' he said with heavy sarcasm. 'It seems we have misunderstood each other.'

'Yes,' she said quickly. 'I think so.'

'Had I realised you were so cold-natured, I would have . . .'

'Just go, please.'

He looked as though he were about to speak, checked himself, and turning on his heels, he left the room.

As soon as he was gone, Jacqui let out a sigh of relief. Fastening a button that had come undone in the struggle, she tucked in her shirt and turned to leave.

She gave a jump. Someone was standing behind her.

Ashford had come in through the far door. 'What are you doing?' he asked as he drew close.

She made light of the affair. 'I was just trying to dampen your friend's enthusiasm.'

'Did you have to behave like that?' He was white with anger. 'I asked you here today to entertain my guests, not insult them.'

'Is it my fault if he made a pass at me?'

Ashford's voice became silky. 'I don't expect much of you, my dear. I've given you a home to live in, a career and anything else you wanted. I don't ask for love or even gratitude in return, but you could at least be civil to my friends when I want it.'

Jacqui gaped at him. 'You're not suggesting that I . . .'

'Quite how you conduct yourself is your affair, my dear, but I feel you could be a shade more accommodating.'

She rounded on him. 'I'm one of the perks of the house now, am I? The complimentary tart for the weekend.'

'Of course not. I just ask you to be a little more accessible, that's all.'

'Who the hell do you think I am?' she cried, the words rising on the crest of her temper.

Ashford paused. The suggestion of a smile touched his lips. 'I don't know,' he replied softly. 'Sometimes I ask myself the same question. These high-blown morals of yours—these fine sentiments. Where do they all come from? They can't be inherited.'

She felt a sudden clutch of panic in her stomach. 'What are you trying to say?' she asked quickly.

'I was thinking of your mother, if you must know.' He was in control now, master of the situation. 'Your mother was a remarkable woman,' he said. 'Talented, intelligent—beautiful, like yourself—but hardly renowned for her virtue.'

Ashford stepped forward. Reaching out, he put his hand into her shirt and grasped the locket that hung round her neck. He gave a quick pull and the fine gold chain stretched and snapped.

He prised open the lid. Inside were two tiny photographs—portraits of a man and a woman.

'This sentimental attachment to your parents' memory is all very charming, my dear,' he said softly, 'but in the circumstances I find it faintly ridiculous.'

He threw the locket aside in disgust. It tinkled down onto the polished wooden floor and skittered away against the wall.

Without another word he went out.

Jacqui's body trembled. Putting one hand to her neck, she touched the red weal where the gold chain had cut into her skin.

The locket lay further down the room. She walked over and, picking it up, held it tightly in her clenched fist.

The panic that had gripped her died away, and in its place there rose a new emotion. It was fierce and raw, but as yet it had no name.

JACQUI SPURRED THE HORSE to a gallop.

Leaning forward, she urged him on, pushing him to his limit. The wind roared in her ears, and she could feel the powerful muscles of the animal bunching and stretching beneath her.

Her one thought was to escape, to get as far away from the chateau

as possible. The fierce, uncontrolled emotion that had swept through her in the gallery was lost in the beat of the galloping hoofs, the excitement of the moment.

As they reached the high ground above the estuary, she stood back in the stirrups and reined in the horse. He slowed to a walk. She dropped the reins and let him take his own path. The racing of her heart steadied; her thoughts became coherent once more.

Rupert used her, this she knew. She was an instrument, a necessary component of his private kingdom. He had no interest in her personally. He needed her to fascinate his friends, to charm his rivals. She served a purpose. And for this he despised her.

His remarks just now in the gallery had been deliberate, sharp and cruel. He had invoked the name of her mother to scare her, to prey on the fears that haunted her mind. There were times when she thought he enjoyed hurting her.

'Well, I'm not going to let him,' she said fiercely. 'He can't hurt me unless I let him.'

Turning round in the saddle, she looked back at the chateau and realised she must return. Running away from Rupert wasn't going to help. She must play the part that had been written for her and wait her chance. If she was ever to break free, he must be confronted. Only then could she sever the invisible cords that tied her to him.

She picked up the reins, turned the horse and cantered back down the hillside. As she approached the chateau she noticed a figure standing on the front steps. The slim build, the neat tailored jacket were unmistakable. It was John Napier.

Jacqui paused. At the sight of him she felt a sudden spark, a gleam of interest that, had she been less preoccupied with her own thoughts, would have surprised her.

The horse slowed to a walk.

NAPIER SAW HER HESITATE. Running back down the steps, he crossed the gravel drive towards her.

Jacqui waited for him to approach. She sat well, he noticed, her back straight, her heels down in the stirrups.

After they had exchanged cautious greetings, Napier took hold of the bridle, cupping the horse's velvet muzzle in his other hand and thinking how sexy some women could look in riding clothes.

'I didn't know you had a horse.'

'I don't,' she replied quickly. 'This is one of Rupert's. I just exercise him at weekends.'

Kicking her toes from the stirrups, she vaulted to the ground beside

him. She led the horse round to the stables and put him into one of the loose boxes. Napier leaned on the stable door and watched as she busied herself about the place.

‘How are you getting on with your investigations?’ she asked, unstrapping the buckle of the girth.

‘Not very well, to be honest.’

She ducked her head under the horse’s neck and looked at him. ‘Are you going to give up?’

‘Not yet.’

She went into the tack room, carrying the saddle over her arm. Napier followed her to the entrance. She settled the saddle on its rack and, reaching up on tiptoe, hung the bridle in place. She came out and closed the door. Taking off her hat, she shook her head, and the golden avalanche of hair fell about her shoulders.

‘I must go and change now,’ she said. ‘You’ll find the others on the terrace.’

A LARGE GROUP was assembled at the rear of the house. They were smartly dressed and talking noisily, moving among one another in the slow, ritualised dance of cocktail parties.

As soon as Napier appeared, a woman fluttered over to him.

Was he the art historian who was causing all the fuss about the picture? she wanted to know.

He admitted he was.

Others followed in her wake, eager to join in the discussion. Napier took a glass and fended off the attack as best he could.

‘I mean, either it is a fake or it isn’t,’ the woman pointed out.

‘I think that’s right,’ he agreed.

‘I do hope it is a fake,’ put in another. ‘One gets so tired of seeing the real thing all the time.’

Napier steered his way through their opinions. After fifteen minutes Ashford came over, wreathed in smiles. ‘Will you excuse us?’ he asked politely. ‘I’d like to borrow Dr Napier for a moment.’

He took him into the sudden silence of the hallway.

‘Last time you were here, I seem to remember you wanted to see my pictures.’

‘That’s right, but don’t let me distract you from your guests.’

‘They won’t miss me,’ Ashford remarked.

He led the way upstairs into the gallery, a graceful room, long and light, with delicately ornate panels leading up to a painted ceiling. As with the rest of the house, it was sparsely furnished. Ashford paused by a window and looked down at the crowded terrace.

Jacqui had just arrived. She was standing directly below him, talking to a handful of the guests.

Ashford watched her intently.

'A beautiful creature, Dr Napier,' he said eventually, 'as I'm sure you'd be the first to admit. She reminds me so much of her parents. She has her mother's figure, her father's wits.'

'You knew her parents well, did you?' Napier enquired.

'I knew her mother, but that's hardly the same thing.'

It was a curious remark, a carefully manufactured innuendo. 'How did you come to be appointed as her guardian?'

'As a matter of fact, it was my own idea. When Jacqui's parents died and there was no one to take their place, I offered my services to the family. I was fortunate enough to have considerable wealth and a secure home to give her.' He moved away from the window. 'But come, Dr Napier, we didn't come up here to discuss history.'

Napier followed him across the floor. Set in the far wall of the gallery was a door, superbly crafted into the panelling. Ashford took a key from his pocket and unlocked it.

It led through to a smaller room, carpeted and dimly lit. The walls on every side were lined with polished racks.

Ashford gestured towards them and said, 'My paintings.'

Napier looked around in wonder. There must have been five hundred pictures stored in there, maybe more.

Flicking on overhead lights, Ashford went over to the nearest rack and drew one out at random. It was a Dutch seascape, with becalmed ships on metallic water, limp sails beneath a sun-washed sky.

'You recognise it, I'm sure.'

'Van de Velde. It's a beautiful piece.'

'And worth twenty times what I paid.' He slipped it back into its place and pulled out a still life by Manet, a single rose in a cut-glass vase. He handed it to Napier.

Napier studied it with reverence. The paintwork was exquisite: darting lights dashed over warm shadows, the yellow of the rose petals singing out from a ground of lavender grey.

Ashford took it back and handed him a Constable, and then a tiny portrait of a girl by Renoir. His collection was a treasure house, and for almost an hour Napier was lost in it.

'Why do you keep them locked in here?' he asked at one point. 'If that's not a rude question.'

Ashford folded his arms. 'Let me explain. At the end of the war I was given the unenviable task of returning art treasures stolen by the Germans to their rightful owners in the district.'





He paused and stared back through the years. 'The tragedy was that in most cases the owners didn't want them back. They were broke, you see. Most had lost everything in the war. What they needed was money, not art treasures.'

'There was one elderly couple over by Pont l'Evêque.' He smiled sadly at the memory. 'They were living in a single room of their house; the rest had been destroyed. When I brought them a Tiepolo that had once hung in their hall, they didn't even bother to look at it. What use was a picture painted for a room that no longer existed?'

'Couldn't they have sold it?' Napier asked.

'Who to? It was nineteen forty-six; there was no art market. Of course, I did the best I could in the circumstances. I was able to buy one or two of these pieces. I didn't want to take advantage of the situation, but people were begging me to take their possessions. Before I knew it, I had become a picture dealer.' He walked over to the window.

'You mean you built everything from those first sales?'

'The art market boomed after the war, as you know, Dr Napier. It was almost embarrassing how much money I made.' He turned, his voice suddenly light. 'Which is why I don't display my paintings all over the house. To some families here the sight of them would be like salt in the wound.'

A thought bubbled up to the surface of Napier's mind. 'Did you buy anything from Eugenie Delaroche?'

The question startled Ashford.

'Yes,' he said. 'I bought her paintings.' He took a cigarette from his silver case and lit it, drawing in a lungful of smoke. 'Poor Eugenie,' he murmured. 'She'd fallen on hard times.'

'I hear she was accused of collaboration.'

Ashford nodded. 'It didn't take much to earn that distinction in those days.' He smoked pensively, gazing into the distance. 'I still try to help her on occasion. That hotel of hers is hardly a commercial success, as you've probably noticed. I buy a few pictures off her when I can—vulgar little things on the whole.' He looked at Napier. 'How did you know all this?'

'It was just a guess,' he replied. 'I noticed that some of the wallpaper in the hotel had dark rectangular patches on it. I assumed they had been caused by paintings. Since there's nothing of that scale in the house today, I took it that they had been sold. I calculated when from the age of the paper.'

'An ingenious piece of detective work,' Ashford said. 'I was forgetting what a very observant young man you are, Dr Napier. I

hope this talent of yours doesn't get you into trouble one day.'

They were interrupted by the sharp click of heels. Napier looked out through the door to see Jacqui approaching across the polished floor of the gallery. She paused in the doorway.

'You're not leaving already, are you?' Ashford asked.

'I have to.'

'But I've hardly seen you today, my dear.'

She gave a shrug. There was a tension between them, Napier noticed. Ashford reached out to her, but she glided away and, turning to Napier, said, 'If you want a lift, you must come now.'

'YOU WERE SHOWING HIM your pictures?' Enrique was disturbed at the prospect. 'Was that wise?' he asked.

'Not wise, but necessary,' replied Ashford. 'I felt it was better to feed his curiosity rather than starve it.'

They strolled across the lawn, leaving the few guests who lingered on the terrace behind them. The sun had gone down and a slight chill had invaded the air.

'Do you think he will manage to discredit *The Estuary Pilgrim*?' Enrique enquired.

'Oh, yes, I'm sure he will,' Ashford replied. 'No fake is perfect. It's only a matter of time before he finds a flaw somewhere.'

'That doesn't worry you?'

'There's still no way he can link my name to the painting.'

'Can't he? I would say he's come dangerously close.'

'Yes,' said Ashford drily. 'Well, should that situation arise, I would have to dispense with him.'

'Isn't that rather risky?'

'Not necessarily,' Ashford replied. 'Napier is convinced that *The Estuary Pilgrim* has been forged by Maurice Lebas, the legal heir to the painting. He's an aggressive, pushy sort, not above tailoring the law to his requirements.'

Enrique nodded. 'So if anything were to happen to Dr Napier, you think the finger would point at this Maurice Lebas.'

'Almost certainly.'

'And the girl?'

A smile touched Ashford's lips. 'You can leave Jacqui to me,' he murmured. 'I'll take care of her.'

'DO YOU HAVE TIME for a drink?'

'Yes,' Jacqui said lightly. 'I think so.'

She parked by the Hôtel Cheval Blanc. It was dark now, and the

harbour lights glittered on the slick of water. Reaching into the glove compartment, she took out a little bunch of foliage.

‘What’s that?’ Napier asked.

‘Parsley. I picked it in the garden. It never seems to grow properly in my window box.’

‘You live near here, do you?’

‘Not far.’

They sat down outside a café on the waterfront and she put the bunch of parsley on the table. Napier glanced at the other tables.

‘Who are you looking for?’ she asked, catching the movement.

‘You still think someone might be following you?’

‘It crossed my mind.’

‘I can’t think who’d want to.’

‘Can’t you?’ His voice was sharper than he intended.

She frowned. ‘Why do you say that?’

Napier didn’t want to be sucked into an argument with her, but he was haunted by a suspicion that compelled him to go on. ‘I saw you talking with Lebas the other day.’

‘Is anything wrong with that?’ Jacqui asked carefully. ‘He rang me at the museum and said he wanted to talk.’

‘And I suppose you discussed *The Estuary Pilgrim*.’

‘Well, of course we did.’

Napier was miserable. The frustration and disappointment of the last few days welled up in him, forcing the accusation from his lips. ‘He didn’t come to you about six months ago and ask you to help him discover a fake painting?’

‘No!’ she cried. ‘He did not. Lebas just wanted to know what you had discovered while you were here in Honfleur and asked me to keep him informed in future.’

‘And presumably he offered to pay you for your services.’

‘Yes,’ she shouted at him, ‘if you must know, he did. But I don’t accept bribes, not from him or anyone else.’

‘Don’t you?’ asked Napier. ‘Not even from Ashford?’

There was a sudden deathly hush.

The metal chair toppled back and clattered to the ground.

Jacqui had jumped to her feet and now stood above him.

‘How dare you say that to me! What do you know about anything?’ Her eyes were blazing with hurt and rage. ‘I’m sick of all this talk of fake paintings and German soldiers and people following you,’ she shouted. ‘It’s all in your imagination. Go away and prove it. Find some real evidence, for God’s sake, and don’t come back to me until you have it.’

She rummaged in her handbag and slammed a hundred-franc note down onto the table. 'That's for the drink,' she sobbed, and then she vanished into the darkness.

Napier cursed himself. How could he have been so stupid, so unnecessarily aggressive?

Lying discarded on the table was the little bunch of parsley. He picked it up and walked out into the night.

AS SOON AS SHE WAS out of sight, Jacqui broke into a run and didn't stop until she reached the door of her apartment.

Inside, the living room was dark. Only the small casement window cast silvery lights on the wall. She threw herself down onto the sofa, her eyes still burning with resentment.

When Pacquetta came in fifteen minutes later, she found her in this same position.

'What are you doing sitting there in the dark?' she asked.

Jacqui didn't answer.

'I thought you were going out this evening,' Paquetta continued comfortably, padding about the room switching on lights.

'Go away, Kettie,' Jacqui replied without looking up. 'I'll talk to you tomorrow.'

Pacquetta rested beefy fists on her hips and looked down at Jacqui suspiciously. 'Is it Rupert Ashford?'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

A slight smile of understanding touched Pacquetta's eyes. 'I see,' she said. 'It's that Englishman, is it?'

'He's so arrogant,' Jacqui retorted hotly.

Pacquetta gave a grunt. 'And of course you've been all sweetness and light in return, haven't you, my love?'

Jacqui stared down at the floor. 'No,' she said miserably, 'I've been beastly to him ever since I met him.'

Her shoulders suddenly jerked, a little choking sob escaped her, and she burst into tears. The anger she'd bottled inside her was gone, and in its place came a terrible sense of loneliness. Drawing close, Pacquetta wrapped solid arms round her. With a quick movement Jacqui slipped to her knees, grasping the older woman round the waist, and buried her face from sight.

Stroking the golden head, Pacquetta rocked her gently, making soft crowing noises in the back of her throat.

'It's all got muddled up, Kettie. It's not him I'm cross with—it just came out that way.'

'Don't fret, my love,' Pacquetta whispered. 'He'll be back.'



## Chapter Eight

‘Ashford’s a bastard,’ said Eugenie. She pronounced the words with care, lending them an unexpected ferocity.

She stood with her back to the fireplace. As usual, she was dressed in black, her slight figure scarcely filling the suit. There was a silk handkerchief in her lapel pocket and mother-of-pearl buttons on her waistcoat.

Napier lay sprawled in a high-backed velvet chair. They had been talking together for almost an hour now, letting the conversation follow its natural course in the shadowed study.

‘I suppose he gave you that sad story about how he bought paintings out of charity?’ she asked.

‘Is it not true?’

‘Of course not,’ she replied contemptuously. ‘Ashford’s never helped anyone in his whole miserable life. He bought my pictures, it’s true—but he might as well have stolen them.’

Napier waited for her to go on.

‘It was the first summer after the end of the war,’ she continued. ‘Ashford walked into the house demanding to speak with me immediately. I’d never met him before, but I knew his name.

Rupert Ashford, the hero of the Resistance. The man who had escaped the Gestapo.

“‘I have some pictures, madame,” he said to me, very polite and efficient. “I believe they could belong to you.”

‘They were mine, all right. Imagine how pleased I was.

““Can you prove you own them?” he asked.

‘I told him I couldn’t, further than that I recognised them.

‘He shook his head. “I’m afraid that without some sort of positive proof I might not be able to release them to you.”

‘I couldn’t believe my ears.

““Of course, you could simplify matters by selling them to me,” he said.’

Eugenie gave a snort as she spoke. ‘Well, I could see his game—either I sold him the paintings or he took them away and denied they’d ever come to light. I told him I wasn’t going to be blackmailed like that. So he left.

‘The next day he was back again. This time he had a warrant to strip the house of its possessions.

““You’re a collaborator,” he told me. “We have to impound your valuables pending an investigation.”

‘There was no escape. I asked him if we couldn’t come to some agreement.

“‘Sell me your pictures,” he said, “and I’ll tear up this warrant.”

‘I sold him the pictures he wanted for a few hundred francs.’ Her voice trembled. ‘The next day the police arrived and stripped the house down to the plaster.’

Her hatred filled the room. It was alive and dangerous. Napier could sense it in the darkness, as he might have sensed the presence of a wild animal.

‘The worst of it was that he enjoyed it,’ she continued. ‘He came here after the police had left to check that they had done the job properly. I think it gave him some primitive satisfaction.’

Eugenie gazed across the room. Through the opened door the kitchen was just visible at the end of the passage. Old Madeleine was bending over the cast-iron range, and the rich aroma of her cooking reached out to them.

‘He told me that you still sell him pictures,’ Napier said.

‘Ah, yes,’ she replied. ‘He buys the odd piece. It helps to salve his conscience. Mind you, he doesn’t like doing it. He detests the sight of them—particularly the erotic ones.’

Napier stared in amazement. ‘You sell him erotic pictures?’

‘Just the occasional nude,’ she replied. Her eyes were suddenly malicious. ‘He burns them the moment my back is turned. They offend him, you see. And anything that offends Rupert Ashford has to be destroyed.’

‘I’M CERTAIN I’VE SEEN HIM before, but I can’t think where.’

‘Describe him to me,’ Spooner suggested.

Napier summoned the image of the man into his mind. He and Spooner were sitting on a bench high above the estuary, eating their lunch together.

‘He’s tall, swarthy, rather overweight. I’d say South American, certainly Latin.’

‘And you say his name was Enrique?’

Napier nodded. ‘I didn’t catch the rest. From the way Ashford introduced him I had the impression he was some sort of business associate of his.’

Spooner chewed on a piece of cheese and pondered. ‘But you’re sure you saw him in London, not here in France?’

‘It was certainly in London. I can see his face, but I can’t picture the setting. It’ll come to me in a while,’ Napier said, checking the time. ‘I must go now. There’s someone I have to meet.’

## Chapter Nine

The fishing boat chugged along at a steady six knots. Slowly and patiently it made its way across the estuary, the broad hull shouldering through flint-grey water.

A mile ahead lay Le Havre.

From the deck Napier could see the ranks of high-rise buildings, the innumerable cranes and gantries that marked the docks. Clustered along the shoreline, the tall stacks of the oil refineries flamed up against the sky, like giant altar candles.

Napier studied the town thoughtfully, his mind leaping forward to the meeting that awaited him on arrival.

Maurice Lebas had rung him the night before. He had suggested they should meet and talk. There was new information on the painting, he'd explained.

Napier had accepted with good grace. He felt that a second meeting with Lebas was now long overdue.

Spooner was sitting on a locker beneath the wheelhouse, his hands plunged deep into his overcoat pockets and his briefcase clamped between his feet. He looked cold and miserable.

It had been his idea to cross the estuary on Albert's boat. Spooner had felt that hiring a car was an unnecessary expense. He now appeared to be regretting this hasty decision.

Albert clambered down from the wheelhouse to join them with three steaming mugs of coffee. He thrust one into Spooner's hand. 'Drink this,' he ordered. 'It'll settle your stomach.'

Before Spooner had a chance to taste it, Albert had reached into his pocket, drawn out a half-bottle of whisky and slopped a generous measure into each cup.

'For the cold,' he explained, taking a pull straight from the bottle for additional insurance.

Napier took a mouthful of the coffee. The spirit burst inside him, spreading out into his veins. He heard Spooner choke.

'Too strong?' Albert asked.

'Not at all,' Spooner replied stoutly. 'Just a little hot.'

The whisky seemed to have done him good. Twin spots of colour appeared in his cheeks. He looked at Albert and then round at the wheelhouse.

'Who's driving this thing?' he asked.

'I lash the wheel and she drives herself,' Albert replied. Reaching up, he slapped the woodwork of the wheelhouse with one hand.

'Don't worry, monsieur. It's only a question of navigation; and navigation, as my grandfather used to say, is simply the art of running aground in the right place.'

'And how long before we reach Le Havre?'

Albert looked up at the sky and then at the approaching shoreline. 'About half an hour,' he said with a shrug.

The engine thumped on, exhausting a fine trail of cinnamon-coloured smoke that settled on the slick of water behind them.

'NAPIER HAS GONE over to Le Havre to see Lebas. He crossed the estuary by boat.'

'How do you know this?' Ashford enquired. 'I thought your man had lost him.'

'I have a contact in Honfleur,' Louis replied. 'A juggler. He keeps me informed of what takes place in the harbour.'

'And when do they intend to return from Le Havre?'

'Later this afternoon, I believe.'

'Delay them,' Ashford said. 'I don't care how you do it, Louis, but make sure that that boat doesn't leave until nightfall.'

THE MEETING WITH LEBAS was short.

Napier took a cab to the large modern block of offices just off the Rue Victor Hugo. An information board in the front hall listed twenty or more separate companies under Lebas's name.

A receptionist took him up to the fifth floor by lift and ushered him through into a private office. It was large and well lit. Two of the walls were plate glass, the others covered in graphs and crowded pinboards. In the centre of the floor three men stood round an architect's model of some industrial development. The shortest of them was Lebas.

The moment Napier arrived, Lebas came over to meet him. His jacket was off and his sleeves were rolled back from thick forearms.

'I'm glad you could make it,' he said shortly, shaking hands. 'I hear you've been in Honfleur for over a week now.'

'Something like that,' Napier agreed.

'And to very little effect, according to that haughty girl in the museum.'

'Unfortunately, that's true.'

Lebas gave a grunt of acknowledgment. Going over to his desk, he picked up a sheaf of papers and handed them to Napier. 'What you haven't seen yet is this. It's the court decision on the painting,' he explained. 'They've upheld my claim.'

'Congratulations,' Napier replied pleasantly.

'*The Estuary Pilgrim* now belongs to me,' Lebas continued, 'and as the legal owner, I'm asking you to forget about it and go back to England.' He looked at Napier with his pebble-hard eyes. 'Otherwise I can't be held responsible for your safety.'

The threat was simple and unveiled.

Lebas gave a brief nod of dismissal and returned to the discussion around the display model. The interview was over.

Napier made his way downstairs again and out into the street. As he was walking across the forecourt in front of the building, he heard his name called. He turned to see a woman hurrying after him.

'You probably won't remember me,' she said as she caught up. 'Nadine Lebas—we met in London this summer.'

'Of course,' Napier replied.

'You've been with Maurice.' She sounded faintly apologetic.

'Briefly.'

She nodded in understanding.

She must be in her early fifties, Napier calculated, an attractive woman, small and slightly brittle. But he noticed that she was flustered, as though acting without orders.

'*The Estuary Pilgrim* is very important to him,' she said after a few moments. 'It's not the money, you must understand. To Maurice it's a symbol of what his family has achieved. He'd never sell it.' She was twisting one ring on her finger and seemed to be struggling to express what was on her mind. '*The Estuary Pilgrim* was the first ship they owned. The start of their fortunes.'

'Which is why the family bought the painting?'

She nodded. 'My husband would never have forged that picture, Dr Napier. A forgery would have no value to him.'

WHEN NAPIER RETURNED to the docks, he found Spooner waiting for him. Bad news was printed across his face.

'We've lost Albert,' he announced.

'What do you mean we've lost him?'

'I came back here from the public-records office about half an hour ago and he was gone,' Spooner replied grimly. 'Since then I've searched the quayside, but there's no sign of him. I didn't want to go further until you arrived.'

Napier muttered a curse to himself. Why couldn't the man stay on the boat, as he'd promised? He could be anywhere. 'We must search the cafés,' he said. 'He's probably pushed off for a drink.'

'My thoughts exactly,' Spooner agreed.



It took over an hour to track Albert down.

He had worked his way round the town's cafés with a couple of companions. When they finally discovered him, he was slumped in the corner of a small brasserie near the Digue Nord. There was a glass of brandy in his hand and he was glowing with goodwill.

'Ah, Doctor, come and join us,' he cried as they came in.

The two hard-eyed men seated on either side of him stood up and melted away into the crowd.

'OK, Albert, we're off now,' Napier told him.

'Just one more before we go.'

'I think you've had enough for the time being.'

Slowly and laboriously they manoeuvred him out into the street and down to the harbour. It was dark now, and the lights glimmered on the water. Albert clambered down the iron ladder, jumped the last few rungs and fell onto the deck.

Napier grasped him beneath the armpits and pulled him into a sitting position. Going to the wheelhouse, he searched in the dark until he found a small Primus stove and a kettle. He boiled water and made a mug of black coffee. Albert drank it and shuddered. On the third cup his eyes focused.

'Can you get this contraption going now?' Napier asked.

'Of course,' Albert replied sulkily. He clambered up into the wheelhouse and pressed the electric starter. The engine caught and fired. Then, lumbering up to the bows, he cast off the mooring and flopped the heavy rope down onto the deck. He pushed the hull away from the shore and returned to the wheelhouse.

For a man who was only half-conscious, Albert had remarkable control over the little boat. Leaving the sanctuary of the port, they rounded a buoy and headed out to sea, the boat lifting and pitching as it hit the swell. Night closed in around them. For half an hour they sailed along in a silence that was broken only by the steady heartbeat of the engine and the lisp of the sea flowing by the hull.

'How did you get on with Lebas?' Spooner enquired after a while. 'I quite forgot to ask you in all this excitement.'

'He wants me to go back to England,' Napier replied. 'The court has ruled in his favour. He now owns *The Estuary Pilgrim*.'

'Predictable, I suppose. Are you going to give up?'

'I might do . . .' Napier's voice trailed off.

'What's the matter?'

'I thought I heard something.' He listened hard, but it was gone. Turning back to Spooner, he was about to go on when it came again, minute but tangible.

Spooner scrambled to his feet. He'd heard it also.

It was a slight rumbling off the starboard bow. As they listened, it grew, becoming firmer and more insistent.

The beat of a ship's engine.

Napier felt icy fingers clutch in his belly. He stared out over the bows. At that moment an area of the darkness deepened, solidified, taking on form and bulk. A great black mass was rearing up out of the night, rushing down on them.

'Oh, God, it's going to hit us!' Spooner shouted.

Napier froze. It was a tugboat, barging through the sea towards them. The steel prow grew, black and malignant, filling his vision, towering up above them. Sea and engine thundered in his ears.

As if drawn by some hidden force, the little fishing boat bucked to one side. The hull dropped for an instant and was sucked inwards. With a sudden violent lurch it lifted, sea boiling beneath, as the tug crashed into its side.

The deck was hurled over and the hull burst on the tug's steel bows, cracking in two like a broken egg. Napier felt himself falling backwards. The boat was toppling over him. The air was full of the scream of voices and tearing wood. Something struck him on the shoulder. Pain and shock suddenly registered, galvanising him into life. Kicking his legs, he threw himself away from the shattered deck.

For a moment he was floating in darkness. And then the sea came up from an unexpected angle to hit him. It was cold and black, grasping his body, sucking him down. He felt himself turning, his arms and legs flailing.

He struggled frantically against the cold enveloping water. His lungs began to tug for air, but he had no idea where to find the surface. A sudden blow from behind stunned him; his mouth opened, and the sea filled his lungs. He choked it out, gasped for air and felt only more water. His energy was beginning to sap; he felt himself spinning over and over in the darkness.

At that moment his body broke the surface.

A wave caught him, rolling him over onto his back. He coughed out water, his lungs retching and clearing. The tugboat was gone, swallowed into the dark as quickly as it had come, and he was alone. Kicking against the cold that was numbing his limbs, he began to swim. Ahead was a large piece of wreckage, shattered planks moulded to a frame, part of the boat's hull.

He met it in the trough of a wave and grasped out wildly, his fingers scrabbling for a handhold. He found a smooth surface and held it firmly. With a heave he pulled his chest and shoulders up out of the

water. As he did so, he felt something moving in the dark beside him, something living. A voice said, 'John?'

Napier reached out a hand and touched wet clothing.

It was Spooner, clinging to the other side of the wreckage.

'How did you get here?' Napier cried out.

The question sounded absurd. As he spoke, he felt himself beginning to laugh, his body shaking with cold and fatigue. Spooner was doing the same, and for a few moments they laughed helplessly, gripping hold of each other.

'And Albert?' Napier asked when he'd caught his breath.

'I've got him here,' Spooner called back. 'But he isn't moving.'

'Is he breathing?'

'I can't tell.'

Albert was lying in the water, his head just resting on the edge of the raft. Napier worked his way round the wreckage, fumbling across sharp wooden shards until he was beside him. He grasped him by the scruff of the neck. Spooner did the same, and between them they pulled him up onto the wooden decking.

Albert groaned at the interference.

'Well, that's one question answered,' Napier observed, slipping back into the water.

The darkness pressed around them. It was growing colder. Napier could feel the current tugging at his feet.

'What do we do now?' Spooner asked.

'Hang on and hope for the best.'

Slowly the raft drifted out to sea, lifting and toppling on the crest of each wave.

THEY HAD BEEN ADRIFT in the estuary for over an hour. Napier could see the distant lights on either shore, but quite where they were and how far they had drifted he didn't know.

A piece of weed touched his foot. He kicked it away. It came again. With a sudden wild surge of hope he reached out with his foot and touched a substance more solid than weed.

'My God,' he shouted, 'it's land.'

Desperately he dug his toes into the soil, trying to hold it as it passed. The land gradually rose beneath him and the raft jolted to a halt. They were aground. Napier staggered to his feet, his limbs scarcely answering the commands of his mind, and half walking, half crawling, he dragged the raft away from the water.

Spooner followed and tumbled down beside him.

For several minutes Napier lay still, savouring the delicious

sensation of being on dry ground. Then, clambering up, he began to inspect their new home. It was a sandbank, almost twenty foot long, he discovered, and humped like the back of a whale.

Spooner looked around. 'Where did this place come from?'

'God knows. Something to do with the tide, I suppose.'

'It's a miracle that we hit it.'

'"Good navigation," Napier quoted, "is the art of running aground in the right place."'

They moved on, hugging themselves against the cold that seeped in through their wet clothing. After a few minutes Spooner paused and voiced the question that was on both their minds. 'It was an accident, wasn't it, John?'

'That we were delayed in Le Havre until nightfall and then mown down by a boat that wasn't carrying navigation lights?' Napier enquired. 'It's possible, I suppose.'

'Who do you think did it, then? Maurice Lebas?'

'It looks that way, doesn't it,' Napier replied, 'but I'm not sure. To be honest, I'm not sure about anything at present.'

They were interrupted by a groan from the raft.

Albert had recovered consciousness. Slowly he uncoiled himself, tipped his legs onto the ground and sat up.

'Where the bloody hell are we?' he asked, gazing around.

'On a sandbank,' Spooner told him.

Albert repeated the words to himself. Bending down, he shovelled up a handful of the soil and lifted it to his nose.

'Sand?' he said flatly. 'This isn't sand. It's that damned mud.'

NAPIER SAT CROSS-LEGGED on the ground, his back resting against the wreckage of the boat, and watched the dawn come up.

His ordeal was over—they were going to survive. It could only be a question of time now before they were rescued.

Unable to relax long enough to sleep, he'd sat awake all night, studying the distant shoreline and trying to estimate their position in the estuary. At first it had been meaningless, a confusion of winking lights, but as time passed, he'd begun to make sense of them. On his extreme left was the beacon on the Cap de la Roque, above Tancarville. From that he had been able to pinpoint Honfleur, closer in and now clearly recognisable from its single lighthouse.

He was cramped with cold, but as the sun rose he clambered to his feet and stretched himself, his joints cracking like dry twigs at the unexpected movement. He walked over to where Spooner stood at the water's edge, gazing out to sea.

There was a sudden yell from Albert. He had jumped to his feet and was waving his arms excitedly.

They ran over to where he was dancing on the shore, and stared out across the estuary. A single fishing boat had emerged from the mist about half a mile away.

‘Have they seen us?’ Spooner asked.

‘I think they have . . .’

The boat was swinging round in their direction. Smoke belched from its exhaust stack and it began to pick up speed.

‘Yes!’ he cried excitedly. ‘They’re coming.’

Twenty yards offshore the fishing boat slowed to a halt, the water creaming at its stern, and then approached the sandbank with painstaking caution, nosing its way forward.

It was a large seagoing vessel, solid and reliable. As soon as its keel nudged the bottom, they waded out and scrambled up the high wooden sides. Lean arms reached down, catching hold of them, hauling them over onto the deck.

When they had tumbled on board, the engines were thrown into reverse and the boat slipped free of the land.

The three of them sat on the hatch cover. Mugs of hot coffee arrived. One of the crewmen opened a locker and drew out some thick fishermen’s sweaters for them to put on. The crew listened to their story and then told some of their own—tales that went back over forty years.

Through the exhaustion and the cold that still ached in his limbs, Napier felt a glow of satisfaction. It hadn’t been for nothing. The long night on the sandbank had served its purpose.

He could now prove that *The Estuary Pilgrim* was a fake.

## Chapter Ten

The waitress brought coffee and hot rolls. Napier ate them hungrily, breaking open the crusts with his hands. He had washed himself as best he could, combing back his hair with his fingers. He was still wearing the heavy sweater the fisherman had loaned him, and for the first time in hours he was beginning to feel warm and comfortable.

Through the open door of the café Napier could see across the quayside to where a trawler was swinging plastic crates ashore. Fish and crushed ice were spilling over the cobbles, while seagulls swooped and hovered, squabbling loudly.

He noticed old Madeleine at that moment. Small and round as a



hedgehog, she was hobbling down the quay. There was a basket over her arm and she was pushing a bicycle. She began searching through the crates of slippery fish, occasionally picking one out and testing it against her nose.

Napier waited until nine before leaving the café. Then he made his way up to the Boudin Museum.

'Jacqui Fontenay?' said the lady in the ticket office. 'I'm afraid she's working at home today.'

Napier ran up to the gallery, checked two of the paintings and then, returning to the door, asked if he could have Jacqui's address.

'Well, we're not supposed to give personal information.'

Napier assured her that this was an emergency.

She hesitated, uncertain, and then ran her finger down a list by the phone. 'Nine, Rue des Petites Boucheries,' she said.

He found it without difficulty, off the Quai St Etienne. The buildings were half-timbered and hung out over the street, like piles of badly stacked books. Jacqui's apartment was set above a small gallery selling postcards and silver jewellery.

The downstairs door was opened by Pacquetta.

'Have I got the right house?' Napier asked. 'I was looking for Jacqui Fontenay.'

'She's having breakfast.'

At that moment Jacqui's voice came down the stairs. 'Who is it, Kettie?' she asked, leaning down over the banister. Catching sight of Napier, she gave a start.

She came to the door in her stockinged feet. Without heels she looked smaller and more vulnerable than before.

'I'm sorry to disturb you,' said Napier. 'Do you have a few minutes to spare? There's something I want you to see.'

'Now?'

He nodded. 'It can't wait.'

'Do I have time to go and put some shoes on?'

A smile flashed into his eyes. 'If you're quick.'

She turned and ran back up to her apartment. A few moments later there was a clatter of heels on the wooden stairs and she reappeared, pulling on a long blue overcoat.

Without another word Napier set off. He seemed excited, intent, and was walking rapidly. Jacqui hurried after him. 'Where are you taking me?' she asked as they reached the quayside.

'Down to the harbour.'

He crossed the narrow bridge above the lock gates and headed out along the western jetty.

'Wait!' she cried, running to keep up. 'What am I supposed to be looking at?'

'The lighthouse,' he called over his shoulder. 'It's wrong.'

'Wrong? I don't understand.'

Napier pointed out across the channel of water to where the lighthouse stood at the mouth of the harbour.

'That's the lighthouse that appears in the background of *The Estuary Pilgrim*,' he said. 'And in the painting you'll find it has a red light on it.'

'Well, it does have a red light.'

'Exactly,' he replied. 'But it should be white.'

Napier pointed back across the town to where the stump of a tower stood in the public gardens.

'In those days there were two lighthouses in Honfleur, one on either side of the harbour.'

Jacqui looked at the tower, struggling to follow his meaning. 'But why should that make a difference?' she asked.

'According to a fisherman I was talking to this morning, that one was the larger of the two,' Napier told her. 'It carried a flashing red light to mark the southern tip of the estuary. Whereas this one, which appears in the painting, is a beacon to identify the approach to the harbour. The two had to be distinguished . . .'

'And so this one had a white light,' she said.

Napier nodded. 'Yes. I checked in the museum. The same lighthouse appears in the background of two or three paintings, and in each case it has a white light. Only one lighthouse is left today, and it has inherited the red light. Whoever forged *The Estuary Pilgrim* didn't know this. He painted the colours just as they are now.'

Once Napier had said his piece, he seemed suddenly shy.

'Is that enough?' he asked.

'Enough what?' she queried.

'Evidence. You told me not to come back to you until I had evidence that *The Estuary Pilgrim* was a fake.'

Jacqui studied him thoughtfully, and then very slowly she smiled. 'Yes,' she said gently. 'I think it's enough.' Reaching forward, she plucked his sleeve. 'Now I think we should go inside before you frighten the seagulls with this jersey of yours.'

They walked back along the jetty, keeping in step with each other as they talked. Napier told her of the night on the sandbank. As she listened, Jacqui's eyes grew round with horror.

Pacquetta studied the two of them closely when they came back into the apartment, sensing the change in their attitudes.

There was an intimacy that hadn't been there before.

She followed Jacqui into the kitchen. 'You can't bring that man here,' she hissed as soon as they were alone. 'It's not proper.'

'Oh, don't be so stuffy, Kettie,' Jacqui laughed.

'And besides, he's filthy dirty.'

'Of course he is. He's been out on a sandbank all night. You go off and forget all about it,' Jacqui ordered, and putting her hands on Pacquetta's shoulders, she propelled her to the front door.

Napier saw Jacqui bend down and kiss the old woman on her iron-grey hair before hustling her away downstairs.

'Who's that?' he asked as Jacqui came back in.

'Pacquetta? She was my nanny when I was a child.'

Jacqui closed the door. Standing there by the window, Napier looked tired and drawn, his eyes dark in his pale face.

'Have you had anything to eat?' she asked.

'I had some rolls in the café.'

'That's not enough,' she replied firmly. Going into the next room, she returned with a bathrobe and a thick white towel in her arms. 'Take a shower,' she ordered, handing them to him, 'and I'll make you some breakfast in the meantime. English breakfast.'

Ten minutes later, when he came out of the bathroom, he found her busy scrambling eggs. As soon as they were done, she piled them onto a slice of buttered toast and carried the plate through into the living room. She took a seat beside him and poured out two cups of coffee. Napier ate eagerly.

'So, if *The Estuary Pilgrim* is a fake, what happened to the original?' she asked.

Napier shrugged. 'I suppose it was blown up on that road above Criquetot.' He saw her disappointment and added, 'Unless it's still sealed up in a canister somewhere, as you suggested.'

As soon as Napier had finished, Jacqui jumped up and began to clear the table. He tried to help, but she prevented him. 'Go and sit down,' she ordered. 'I'll just put these in the kitchen.'

Napier did as he was told and, crossing the room, he settled himself on the sofa. When Jacqui came through a moment later, she found him sleeping.

NAPIER WOKE with a start.

Opening his eyes, he sat up, apologising for dropping off.

Jacqui hushed him. 'It was a good thing to do,' she said gently. 'You were worn out. How are you feeling now?'

'Much better,' he replied. 'What's the time?'

'It's midday.' She paused and then added lightly, 'I have to go over to Etretat this afternoon and pick up a picture. I was wondering whether you'd like to come with me?'

Napier's eyes lit up at the suggestion.

'I thought maybe we could have lunch together.'

Napier went back to the hotel to change, while Jacqui put together a last-minute picnic.

When they met on the quayside half an hour later, he was looking fresh and tidy once more, dressed in his neat English way and carrying a little bouquet in his hand. 'I brought this for you,' he said, holding it out to her bashfully. Buried in the cocoon of ribbon and coloured paper was a bright green bunch of parsley.

'You left some with me last time we met.'

Jacqui was enchanted. 'Oh,' she cried with pleasure, 'doesn't it look sweet, all wrapped up like that?'

'The shop thought I'd got the word wrong and kept trying to sell me roses instead,' Napier told her.

Further along the quayside a crowd had gathered. As they were passing by it parted, and the juggler, in his red and black clothes and flat shoes, stepped out in front of them. He bowed and rolled his hat down into his hand.

'Good day, Dr Napier,' he said. 'I hear you were out swimming last night.' Stepping back with a second bow, he returned to his act.

'How did he know your name?' Jacqui asked.

Napier shrugged. 'He must have picked it up from one of the fishermen, I suppose.'

AT ETRETAT THE SEA was sparkling in the autumn sunshine, the great cliffs hazy in the warm air. They walked along the front together, watching the bathers splashing about in the waves.

'Look,' Jacqui cried, pointing towards the rocks, 'the tide's going out. We can get through to the next bay.'

Quickly she took off her shoes and stockings. Jumping down onto the beach, she made her way across the slippery stones exposed by the tide, skipping from one to the next, with her arms held out on either side. From time to time she turned back to Napier, laughing at his clumsy attempts to keep up.

She was flirting outrageously, she told herself. But it didn't matter. She was feeling happy and shameless.

The cliffs seemed to rear up above them as they approached, growing larger and more majestic. Jacqui led the way to a cave in the rock face. 'It goes right through to the other side,' she told him. 'You

must crouch down or you'll bang your head in the dark.' The tunnel twisted and turned for fifty yards and then suddenly burst out into the sunshine. The bay stretched before them, the sea enamel blue, the cliffs white as a new loaf of bread.

'There!' she cried. 'Isn't this perfect for a picnic?'

They ate their lunch seated on a large rock above the sea. Jacqui had brought pâté and cheese, mushrooms à la grecque and crab salad in little cardboard packages. They drank Chablis from wineglasses that she'd carefully wrapped in napkins.

They weren't alone in the bay. Two other people had found their way through the tunnel, but Jacqui and Napier were too absorbed in each other to notice the intrusion.

Napier discovered that beneath her professional knowledge Jacqui had a charming and romantic view of art. 'Whenever I'm in this bay, I can picture Monet at work,' she told him, 'with Maupassant behind him, watching him paint. Do you think that's silly?'

Napier shook his head. 'When I was at Oxford, I would never go back to a place where I'd been happy in case it damaged the memory. It's much the same thing.'

'Yes, it is,' she agreed seriously. She looked at Napier. He wasn't good-looking in any conventional sense. But she liked the firm line of his nose and forehead, the way his eyes smiled when he talked. There was a strength to him, an assurance, but held in reserve. Napier made no open display of masculinity.

Jumping down, they walked along the water's edge. Jacqui told him of her first visit to the Orangerie, in Paris, the sight of Monet's water-lily paintings on the walls and how she had been given Napier's book as a present afterwards.

'I thought you hadn't read anything by me.'

'I just said that on the spur of the moment,' she confessed. 'I was so cross with you that day, Jean.'

She used the French equivalent for his name. He liked that; it was more personal.

At that moment a wave rushed up over their feet, pounding them with tiny pebbles. Jacqui gave a little squeak of surprise at the tingling sensation and grasped hold of her ankles. The locket slipped from her shirt and dangled from her neck.

'What's that?' Napier asked.

Lifting the chain over her head, she handed it to him. Napier studied the two tiny portraits inside.

'People say I look like my father,' she said, a touch of defiance in her voice, as though willing him to agree.



‘He’s much darker than you.’

‘Yes,’ she agreed, ‘the whole family is. My brother’s hair is almost black.’

‘You have a brother?’

‘I have two,’ she said. ‘Both much older than me.’

The afternoon was almost spent. When they reached the cave, they found the tide had risen; the channels of water between the rocks were deep and wide. Cautiously they picked their way across the surface. At one pool Jacqui lost her balance and darted out an arm for support. Napier took her hand and held it and they walked on again, their fingers meshed together.

The evening had drawn in by the time they arrived back in Honfleur. ‘I must go and change,’ she told him in the hallway of her apartment. ‘I’m meant to be going out in a few minutes.’

‘When will I see you again? Tomorrow?’

‘If you like.’ Reaching up, she kissed him quickly and ran upstairs. A thought struck her and she turned round. ‘Jean?’

Napier glanced up.

‘I’ve just realised, we forgot to pick up that picture.’

## Chapter Eleven

Spooner sounded interested, but not convinced. ‘You believed her, did you?’ he asked.

‘I think so,’ replied Napier. ‘Nadine Lebas is convinced that her husband had nothing to do with faking the painting.’

They walked across to the garden seat and sat down. The morning dew glistened on the long grass. Spooner crossed one leg over the other and stared at the polish on his toecap.

‘How was she able to recognise you?’

‘We met briefly at the National Gallery last summer,’ Napier told him. ‘Margot Latchman introduced us.’ At the mention of Margot’s name he felt a memory stir in the depths of his mind. Suddenly he had it. ‘My God,’ he said. ‘Enrique.’

Spooner looked at him sharply.

‘That’s where I saw him last,’ Napier said excitedly. ‘It was with Margot Latchman. We were having lunch in Green’s. She was telling me that appearances could be deceptive, and to prove it she pointed to a man at another table. It was Enrique.’

‘Are you sure it was him?’

‘Absolutely. She told me he was involved in some mischief—arms

dealing, I think it was—but that nothing had ever been proved. And he's the man who does business with Ashford.'

Spooner allowed himself a small and secretive smile. 'Wait here a second,' he said. Getting to his feet, he went into the hotel, returning a few minutes later with a file. He handed it to Napier.

The file contained a detailed biography of Rupert Ashford.

Napier read through it with growing interest. Listed were all his company holdings, business enterprises and financial assets—the entire empire he had built up over the years.

'Look at this,' Napier said. 'He's been in jail.'

Spooner nodded in satisfaction. 'A phase of his life he rarely mentions. Ashford served a three-year sentence in the States for fraud in the early sixties. There he met Enrique de la Pena, and it's presumably then that they forged some sort of business alliance. Ashford opened his first art gallery shortly afterwards.'

Spooner took the file back and began thumbing through, indicating relevant passages. 'By the late sixties he had set up a chain of successful galleries across Europe.'

Napier listened in silence, while thoughts and questions fizzed up in his mind like fireworks.

'The success of Ashford's galleries depended on considerable capital backing from outside investors. Many of them preferred to remain anonymous. Film stars, oil millionaires, philanthropists—they didn't want their names broadcast.'

'That's quite common in the art world,' Napier pointed out.

'Of course it is,' Spooner agreed gravely. 'Only in this case none of them existed. An investigation last year revealed that Ashford had no sponsors of any significance. The enormous bulk of his capital comes from elsewhere.'

'Enrique?'

Spooner nodded. 'With money he's harvested from arms dealing, among other things. He's almost certainly involved in arms, narcotics, prostitution—nothing's too good for him.'

'While Ashford launders the profits through his galleries.'

'That's the way it looks. Mind you, this is only speculation.'

Napier gazed at him for a moment and then, leaning across, poked him on the shirtfront with one finger.

'How do you know all this, Spooner?'

Getting to his feet, Spooner straightened his waistcoat and looked down at the ground. 'I haven't been entirely honest with you, I'm afraid. For some time now we've been interested in Ashford.'

'We?'

'Wallace-Jones,' he replied, 'the firm I work for. I didn't deceive you there—we really are loss adjusters, in a sense.'

'You mean you work for the government rather than Lloyd's,' Napier said bluntly.

Spooner nodded. 'The City of London Fraud Squad, to be precise. Ashford is still a British citizen, you see. We've been working on his case for almost two years now. It's not easy: his business affairs are like a rabbit warren. To make matters worse, he has a number of quite legitimate dealings with Enrique, which is why he can speak of the association so openly.'

'But what has all this got to do with *The Estuary Pilgrim*?'

'By the beginning of this year our investigations had gone stale. Then this painting appeared. We noticed that it had been lost at exactly the same moment as Ashford had been in Honfleur and reappeared not far from where he now lived. Added to this, its resurrection had been prophesied by his own ward, Jacqui Fontenay. The coincidence seemed too good to miss. If the painting did turn out to be a fake, and we could pin the blame on Ashford, it could be just the lucky break we were looking for.'

'But why bring me in on it?'

Spooner smiled. 'We needed someone who understood pictures. And you were already involved in the painting.'

'So if you've been waiting for me to come up with an answer, what have you been doing in the archives for the last week?'

Spooner appeared to be mildly embarrassed. 'I've been examining some of the medieval manuscripts they have in there,' he confessed. 'It's really the most remarkable collection.'

Sitting back on the bench, Napier gazed up at him. 'You really are the most extraordinary man,' he said. 'So what happens now?'

'I imagine we continue our investigations, collect our evidence together and then take it to the police.'

'NOT THE POLICE!' Jacqui cried.

'But Ashford must be involved in some way.'

'He can't be,' she replied desperately. 'It wouldn't help him to fake the picture.'

Napier had been describing the conversation he'd had with Spooner that morning. Napier had spoken gently, but the words had filled her with panic. She didn't want to believe him, but she knew he was right. Rupert was somehow involved with *The Estuary Pilgrim*.

'I don't pretend to understand what's going on,' Napier told her, 'but the dates and places do all seem to fit. Ashford was in Honfleur

at exactly the same moment as the painting vanished.'

Jacqui gave a resigned nod. 'And then it reappeared just after I'd written that wretched article. I wish to God I hadn't.'

'There was nothing wrong with what you wrote,' he said, trying to calm her, 'only in the use it was put to later.'

'Rupert advised me not to publish my discoveries. The evidence was rather thin, he told me.'

Reaching across the table, Napier took her hand in his, and she responded quickly, holding it tightly.

'You're very loyal to him,' he said, looking across at her. 'Although I can't see that he has done anything to deserve it.'

'It's not that,' she mumbled.

'But you're fond of him.'

'I'm not!' she said, speaking with sudden passion. 'I'm not loyal, not fond, not any of those things . . . I hate him!'

Napier paused, momentarily taken aback by the ferocity of this confession.

'It's true,' she said after a moment. 'I hate the way he treats me, as though I was some . . . creature.' Her voice was quieter now, more controlled. Looking up at Napier, she smiled sadly and ran her hand across his. 'Jean, I've tried to do as he expects, but it's no good. He fills me with revulsion. I can't bear him.'

'Then why don't you let me go to the police?' Napier asked.

She shook her head. 'You mustn't,' she whispered.

'But why not?'

For a moment she considered trying to explain, to describe the black, whirling fear that darkened her mind, but she fought back the desire. It was hopeless.

'I can't explain,' she said quietly.

JACQUI PARKED HER CAR, then ran up the graceful steps of the chateau and went inside. Louis came into the hall to meet her.

'Is Rupert at home?' she asked, pausing on the staircase.

'No, mademoiselle, he has gone into Trouville. I don't expect him back until this evening.'

Jacqui thanked him and carried on upstairs.

It was a suspicion, nothing more. She hadn't said anything to Napier as she wasn't sure whether he'd have thought it relevant.

To tell the truth, she wasn't sure herself.

Going to the gallery, she closed the double doors, crossed over to the far wall and carefully searched until she found one panel in particular. It was decorated with garlands of flowers on a ground of

misted grey. In the lower corner was a scrollwork of ormolu, beautifully inlaid into the wood.

Kneeling down, she examined it closely. There was nothing out of the ordinary about the design, but as she ran her hand across the surface, following the intricate gold pattern, her finger touched a tiny protruding pin in the centre of one scroll.

It appeared to be a catch of some sort. She moved the pin to one side. A shutter opened, revealing a small round hole in the wall.

This was what had caught her attention.

It must have been left open that weekend. She'd noticed it when she picked up her locket, which Ashford had thrown across the floor.

Getting to her feet, she checked the rest of the panel. The wall was not a solid surface, she realised. The little aperture hidden in the lower corner was the keyhole to a door. The whole panel could be opened.

She moved along to the next. It was identical to the first. With a tremor of excitement she discovered that the entire expanse of panelling was hinged in this way. The wall was hollow.

Slipping out of the gallery, she ran to her room and changed her clothes. As she came downstairs she met Louis in the hallway, looking at her strangely. With a little bow he opened the front door, and his eyes followed her outside.

Going to the stables, Jacqui led Bastian, a large bay gelding, out into the yard. She saddled him quickly and, swinging herself onto his back, she rode him into the woods above the chateau.

It was a day of autumnal stillness. Following a track, she rode for over a mile through the woods, ordering her thoughts. By the time she came out onto the open ground above the estuary, she had reached a decision. Turning the horse's head, she returned to the stables.

Back in the chateau, she went directly upstairs to the gallery. Laying her hat and riding crop on a side table, she pressed the bell and waited for Louis to arrive.

The room was still in darkness. Opening two of the windows, Jacqui pushed the shutters apart, letting in the daylight.

'You rang for me, mademoiselle?' Louis asked from the doorway. His expression was wary, uncertain.

'Yes, Louis,' she replied. Her voice was shaking. 'I'd like the key to these panels, please.'

'I'm sorry,' he said after a moment. 'I don't understand.'

'It's quite simple,' she replied archly. 'I want you to open these doors for me.'

Louis looked at her steadily. 'Only Monsieur Rupert has the key to the locks.'



'He told me you keep another,' Jacqui returned. It was a guess, but it seemed to hit the mark nonetheless.

'Very well, mademoiselle,' he said with stony politeness, 'if that is what you wish.'

He left the room, closing the doors behind him.

Jacqui let out her breath in a rush. For the first time she felt truly frightened by what she had undertaken.

Louis was back within the minute. In his hand was a silver key.

'Thank you, Louis,' she said as he handed it to her. 'That will be all for now.'

As soon as he had withdrawn, Jacqui knelt down and, lifting the little gilt shutter in one panel, she inserted the key. There was a soft click and the panel sprang open with a sigh of suction.

She stood up and swung the panel back. It reached to the ceiling and was surprisingly heavy.

Inside was a single large picture. It hung in a shallow compartment, not two foot deep and lined with claret-red silk.

The scene was of wild fighting figures on a stone bridge. Horses were rearing, standards fluttered, and the air was full of fear and shouting. The *Battle of the Amazons* by Delacroix.

Jacqui had never seen the painting before, but she recognised it immediately. It was one of the pictures that had been hanging in General von Eichendorff's headquarters in Honfleur.

She stared at the painting in horror, but at the same time she was not surprised. She closed the door and unlocked the next panel in the same way. Here there were four smaller paintings by Bonnard.

As she reached out to close the door, a hand caught her by the wrist. She spun round.

It was Ashford.

His face was close to hers, almost touching. He was gripping her tightly. Jacqui felt fear and guilt collide into panic. Where had he come from? He wasn't supposed to be here. She gave a cry and pulled away, frantically trying to break free of his grasp, but he held her relentlessly. For a brief instant they struggled. And then, without warning, he released her.

'You stupid, irresponsible little tramp,' he hissed, and slapped her hard in the face with the back of his hand.

Jacqui staggered backwards, threw out her arms to keep her balance and fell heavily, banging her elbow on the floor.

Ashford moved with the speed of a striking cobra.

Picking up the riding crop that lay on a side table, he stepped over her as she was scrambling to her feet, and raising it above his head, he

struck her across the back. She gave a little whimper at the sudden pain and fell down. Ashford caught her by the hair, pulling her over onto her face, and began systematically to beat her across the shoulders and the back of her neck.

Jacqui squirmed and threw her arms up to protect her face, while the crop whipped through the thin material of her shirt.

On the sixth stroke Ashford paused, the crop raised in his hand. The madness left him, like the passing of a summer storm. Dropping his arm, he let her go.

Jacqui looked up at him. Her pain and shock receded to be replaced immediately by anger: a white diamond-hard fury.

Springing to her feet, she confronted him.

'Where did you get those paintings?' she shouted.

Ashford simply smiled at her.

'I insist you tell me where those paintings came from, Rupert.'

'You insist?' he echoed, with a note of sarcasm. 'And who are you to insist anything? I've already given you what you deserve. But since you ask, those pictures are mine. They belong to me.'

'How can that be?' Jacqui replied quickly. She nursed her smarting arms and looked at him with incomprehension.

'I earned them by risking my own neck.'

'I don't understand,' she said with a shake of her head.

Ashford considered her thoughtfully. 'Since you now know part of the story, it is only right that you hear the rest.'

'In the spring of nineteen forty-four I was here in Normandy. As you know, these pictures belonged to General von Eichendorff in those days. I decided to take them from him.'

Jacqui felt anger melting away, dissolving into a strange, horrified fascination as he described how he was tortured by the Gestapo, how he'd been taken before a firing squad and pretended to break down at the last minute. He told Jacqui how he had persuaded his guards to take him before von Eichendorff. And in a few words he outlined the proposition he'd put to the general.

'I offered to hide his paintings until the war was over and then sell them back to him. Von Eichendorff was a rich man, and he knew the war was lost. But still it took him four days to come to a decision. Four long days while I sat rotting in a cell.' He paused and brooded for a moment, the memory bright in his mind. 'Finally he summoned me. He would have his paintings sealed into metal containers, he said, and buried in five separate places in the hills behind Honfleur. This job was given to his adjutant. I wasn't to be told where he'd hidden them until the war was over.'

'In the meantime, a set of identical containers was made and filled with rolls of bare canvas, primed and smeared with oil paint, so that after a fire the charred remains would resemble those of a burnt masterpiece. These were loaded onto a convoy and shipped back across France by road.

'I was then allowed to escape. The general created a diversion by starting a fire in the building where I was being held, and in the commotion I was able to get away. I contacted the Maquis, told them that the convoy was carrying vital components of some new secret weapon and left them to deal with it.'

Jacqui glanced quickly at the gallery walls. 'But you didn't send the pictures to him. They're still here.'

'We had a forger working for us in the Resistance. He made passports, identity papers, anything else we needed at the time.

'After the war the general contacted me, giving me the first of the burial sites. I dug the paintings up and had them copied. My forger did an astonishing job. This man was an artist, a true craftsman. But then I'm forgetting—you've seen his work, haven't you?

'So the paintings you sent to von Eichendorff were fakes?'

'Yes.' With sudden conviction he added, 'It was right that I should have the originals. They belonged to me.'

Reaching up, he dug his fingers into his face and plucked the glass eye from its socket. Jacqui gave a little gasp and fell back, sickened by the sight. The eye had come out with a soft plop, as though pulled from mud. The fine membrane of the lid fell inwards, and the empty, gaping cavity now stared at her.

'I bought those paintings,' Ashford spat at her. 'And this was the price I paid.'

Thrusting out her chin, she looked straight into his deformed face. 'Why did you put that fake in Criquetot?' she demanded.

Ashford's single eye looked at her in surprise. 'Isn't that obvious?' he asked. 'It was to stop this witch hunt you've started. You could have been right. Maybe one of those canisters had survived. I couldn't risk the consequences of it being found out.'

'But why didn't you put the real painting on that building site?' she asked. 'If *The Estuary Pilgrim* had been genuine, there would never have been any witch hunt. With all these paintings in your possession, couldn't you have let one go?'

The question seemed to amuse him. Picking up the key that Jacqui had dropped, he went over to the panels and began to open them one by one. Gradually the serene gallery was transformed, as painting after painting was revealed in its hiding place.

When he had finished, Ashford turned and, indicating the ranks of framed canvases, he said, 'I didn't put the real painting in Criquetot, my dear, because I don't have it. When I unearthed the collection after the war, *The Estuary Pilgrim* was missing.' A suggestion of sarcasm curled the edge of his voice. 'I imagine someone stole it.'

Jacqui looked at him in amazement. 'Does it still exist?'

'Possibly. But if it does, I can't imagine where it can be.'

Jacqui looked across at the wall of paintings.

'The fake, as you choose to call it, was made from photographs,' Ashford continued. 'In its own way it was a masterpiece. Even the alterations in the underpainting could stand up to X-ray examination. As it happened, I never had to send it to the general. He died in nineteen forty-seven, and the painting remained with me.'

'Why are you telling me all this?' Jacqui asked suddenly.

The ghost of a smile touched his lips. 'I want you to understand, my dear. Because now you are going to help me.'

Jacqui bristled. 'Help you? After what you've done? Never!'

He was angry now, and his voice grew silky as he spoke. 'I'm afraid you have no option.'

'If you try force, I'll go to the police,' she flashed at him.

'The police?' he repeated. 'No, you'd never do that, my dear. Not knowing who I am—what I am to you.'

He saw her falter at his words.

'It just wouldn't be right, would it, my dear?'

Slowly her resistance crumbled. The fire died down in her eyes, her shoulders sagged and she hung her head.

Ashford's lean face blazed in triumph. Taking her chin in his hand, he lifted her head and looked down into frightened eyes.

'You are not going to the police,' he told her. 'In fact, you will return to Honfleur as though nothing had happened this afternoon.'

The bleak despair chilled her once more.

'Yes, Rupert,' she said meekly.

'Then the next time you see Dr Napier you'll tell him that you found some pictures while you were here—nothing of any great interest, but worth looking at nonetheless. You'll then suggest that he see them for himself and bring him to the chateau.' He stroked her hair with his hand. 'Is that understood, my dear?'

'Yes, Rupert.'

LOUIS CLOSED EACH PANEL in turn and the gallery regained its former restrained elegance.

Ashford stood by the window, staring out at the gardens.

'She tricked you, Louis,' he said after a few minutes.

Louis accepted the criticism humbly. 'She was so very sure of what she was asking,' he said steadily. 'I assumed—'

'Never assume anything,' Ashford cut in. He turned back to the window. 'There is little time left. We must finish this business.'

'Mademoiselle Jacqui has returned to Honfleur?'

'Why do you ask?'

Louis shrugged. 'After what she has seen—after what you have done to her—do you think it wise to let her go?'

'Of course.' Ashford dismissed the remark. 'She will do as I have instructed her.' He knew this to be true. It was the role for which he had groomed her over the years. There could be no question of doubt. She might not want to obey him, but then she had no option. 'The silly girl is a victim of her own conscience.'

## Chapter Twelve

It was twelve thirty. Ponderously the bells tolled out the half-hour, scattering the pigeons from the belfry. Down below, the square was bustling with activity at the Saturday-morning market. Napier sat at a table outside the Restaurant Sainte Catherine. When Jacqui arrived a few minutes later, she kissed him warmly on both cheeks.

'I thought it would be pleasant to be out here,' Napier told her. 'It seemed a shame to be indoors in this weather.'

'Yes,' she agreed shortly.

They ordered lunch. Jacqui spent a long time deliberating what she was going to have. Napier was surprised. It was quite unlike her to take so long. Finally she ordered a salad.

As they ate, Napier told her of his morning. Jacqui listened without any great enthusiasm, toying with her fork as he spoke.

'Are you feeling all right, *chérie*?' he asked suddenly.

'Yes,' she replied with a quick shake of her head. 'I'm just a little tired.' She was looking across the table at him intently. It was as though she were willing him to read her thoughts, to see what was troubling her without having to speak of it herself.

As soon as lunch was over, she stood up to go. 'I should be getting back to the museum now,' she said.

'It can wait,' Napier replied calmly. Taking her by the arm, he led her away from the restaurant and down to the harbour. Leaving the crowds, they walked out along the pier, past the piles of cordage and drying nets. At the far end was a large cast-iron capstan. Catching



Jacqui round the waist, Napier lifted her up, sitting her on its smooth, rounded cap.

'Now,' he said, placing his hands on either side of her so that she was trapped between his arms, 'what's the matter?'

Jacqui's eyes were round and trusting. She hesitated for a moment, and then, slipping off her overcoat, she unbuttoned her sleeve. Pulling it back, she showed him her bare arm.

The strokes of the riding crop were still clearly visible. The virulent red weals had died away to pale blue-black bruises, but the violence of the attack spoke for itself.

'Did Rupert do this to you?'

She nodded.

'But why?'

'Because I found von Eichendorff's pictures.'

She described the hidden doors in the gallery with their tiny keyholes, and the pictures she'd found inside. As the story unfolded she became caught up in it and the words poured out of her.

'And Rupert caught you looking at them, did he?'

'Yes,' she said. 'He just went wild, Jean, like an animal.' She gave a little sob and fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief.

'My poor love,' he murmured, slipping his arms round her waist. 'It must have been very frightening for you.'

She dabbed at her nose. 'I'm not meant to be telling you this,' she said after a moment. 'Rupert wants me to take you over to the chateau. He told me to say that there were some pictures for you to see. Oh, Jean!' she burst out. 'I was awake all night trying to decide what to do. I think Rupert wants to do something terrible to you.'

'Then why do you obey him?'

She made a small, helpless gesture, indicating their present conversation. 'I haven't obeyed him,' she said. 'That's the point.'

'But why does he expect you to, *chérie*?' he asked softly. 'What is this power that Rupert has over you?'

She tucked the handkerchief back into her bag, composing herself.

'Tell me.'

'Isn't it obvious?' she whispered, suddenly giving in. 'Rupert's my father.'

Napier gathered her hands into his. 'Did he tell you that?' he asked carefully.

'Not in so many words.'

'Then what makes you so certain?'

'Just look at me,' she said with sudden passion. 'You only have to look at me to realise he's my father.'

Napier was incredulous. 'Why? Because you have blonde hair and your parents were both dark? It's not much to go on.'

'Maybe not,' she replied sadly, 'but there are all sorts of other indications. For example, when my parents died, Rupert showed no interest in my brothers at all—only in me.'

'But that doesn't prove anything.'

She reached out and ran the back of her fingers down his cheek. 'He is my father,' she said. 'He's practically told me so.'

'In which case he's lying,' Napier replied. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty-six.'

He gave a quick nod. 'And when was your last birthday?'

'Two months ago. What's that got to do with anything?'

'A great deal,' he said with a smile. 'Because on the day that you were born, Rupert Ashford had just completed the first two years of a jail sentence in Florida.'

Jacqui stared at him in disbelief.

'Don't you see?' Napier said earnestly. 'He's been blackmailing you. You conceived this wild idea that Rupert was your father—it was your invention, not his—but he's capitalised on it ever since.'

Jacqui's eyes had darkened. 'But why has he done this?'

'It was his way of keeping you in his power. By suggesting he was your father, he gave himself complete control of you.'

Jacqui stared at him for a moment and then, jumping down from where she was sitting, she walked to the end of the pier. For almost five minutes she stood gazing out to sea, deep in thought, while the breeze lifted and spread the heavy cape of her hair.

Abruptly she turned and strode back towards him.

Her face was radiant. She smiled and, reaching out her hands to him, said, 'Come, *chéri*.'

'WOULD YOU LIKE something to drink?' she called out from the kitchen.

'Some brandy, if you have it.'

'Yes.' She opened a cupboard and took out a bottle. Putting it on the coffee tray, she carried it into the living room.

She had been slightly apprehensive when they had arrived back at her apartment. 'I shouldn't really be taking the afternoon off like this,' she'd said to him.

'Give the museum a ring and tell them that you're entertaining an important client and are not to be disturbed.'

Jacqui had giggled and made the call.

Now Napier was sitting sprawled on the sofa, his arms stretched

out along the back. He jumped up as she came in and took the tray from her, slipping it down on the table.

'Help yourself, *chéri*.' Kneeling down, Jacqui began searching through a stack of compact discs. She selected one and fed it into the player. She sat back on her heels, waiting expectantly.

It was the overture to *Tristan und Isolde*. Jacqui relaxed and, falling back, she stretched herself catlike across the floor. Leaving the sofa, Napier came and sat beside her. Jacqui lay on her back and gazed up at him, her hair fanned out in a golden halo about her head. A single lock fell across her face. Reaching out, Napier stroked it to one side.

Jacqui stirred slightly, her face lifted towards him.

Napier kissed her gently on the lips. Reaching out, she slipped her arms round his shoulders, drawing herself up to him. Her lips tasted sweet and warm; her perfume filled his head. The nervous girl who'd sat opposite him at lunch was transformed. She was eager and generous, pressing her body into his.

As the afternoon slipped by they sat together on the floor of her apartment, exchanging thoughts and memories and contented confessions, their voices low and reassuring, expressing their desire through small signs and caresses.

It was only as evening drew in that Jacqui returned to the question of the paintings. 'What do you think became of *The Estuary Pilgrim*?' she asked. 'Do you think the general could have buried it separately, kept it for himself?'

'I doubt it. It just wouldn't have been practical.' Napier settled his hands behind his head. 'It must have been stolen some time after the paintings had left his room but before they were buried.'

'But who can have done it?' she asked. 'The only people who could possibly have known about it were von Eichendorff, Ashford and . . .' Jacqui realised what she was about to say.

'And Schwartz,' Napier finished for her. 'Didn't you say that Schwartz was at the meetings between Ashford and the general?'

'Yes,' she cried excitedly, 'and it was Schwartz who actually buried the pictures. Rupert said so yesterday.'

They stared at each other, thoughts racing ahead.

'Could Schwartz have stolen *The Estuary Pilgrim*?' Jacqui breathed, her eyes shining with speculation.

'Certainly. And no one would have been any the wiser.'

'But what would he have done with it?'

'I've no idea,' Napier replied, 'and I imagine no one else does either. He died a few days after the pictures were buried.' He scrambled to his feet, drawing Jacqui up with him.



'Where are we going?' she asked, seeing the excitement that had come into his eyes.

'Schwartz is buried here in Honfleur, in the cemetery of Notre-Dame de Grâce,' he explained hurriedly. 'He was shot for desertion about a week after *The Estuary Pilgrim* was lost.'

'You think the two are connected?'

'Don't you?'

THEY MADE THEIR WAY up the hillside above Honfleur. The street was steep and crooked. Shutters hung open, and occasional snatches of conversation and the rich smells of evening cooking drifted out to them from open windows as they passed.

The events of the day had come so quickly that Jacqui hadn't fully grasped their significance. She needed time to evaluate them. All she knew was that she was intoxicatingly happy.

She stole a glance at Napier. He must have been thinking along the same lines, for he smiled. Without speaking, they slipped their arms round each other and continued on their way.

Notre-Dame de Grâce stood in a grove of beech trees, high above the estuary, visible from miles out at sea. It was a mariner's chapel, squat and tough, with thick walls and a low belfry. Inside it was dark and still. There was a sound from the vestry door and the curé appeared, busily zipping himself into a leather jacket.

'We were looking for the cemetery,' Jacqui explained.

He nodded. 'It's round the back. Come, I'll show you.'

The leaves were dripping from the trees, falling soft as snowflakes, muffling the gravel path as they followed him to the rear of the building.

The cemetery was joined to the chapel and almost hidden behind the arm of one transept. Clanking open the latched gate, the curé led the way inside. The enclosed space was small and intimate, a place for reflection and privacy, surrounded on three sides by a high stone wall.

A garden seat was set at the end of a short pathway and the graves were laid out symmetrically on either side. Grey slabs, artificial flowers, mourning angels with wings folded over their heads. The grass between was unmown and licked over the headstones.

Jacqui and Napier found Schwartz's grave in the shadow of a yew tree. It was simple and unpretentious, just a name and a date cut onto a block of smooth granite. Perched on the ground in front was a jam jar containing a handful of dandelions and daisies. They had been picked from the grass nearby and arranged without art.

Napier turned to the gate, where the curé was waiting. 'How did a German soldier come to be buried here?' he asked.



Taking the prompt, the curé walked over to them and looked down at the grave. His hands were thrust into the front pockets of his jacket. 'Can't say,' he replied. 'It was before my time here.' He gave a shrug. 'Strange things happened during the war.'

Napier gave a grunt of understanding.

'It was vandalised some years ago,' the curé added.

'That doesn't surprise me.' Napier nodded towards the jam jar. 'You don't happen to know who put those flowers there, I suppose?'

'Children,' the curé replied flatly. 'I often catch them playing with the graves.'

He was a man without curiosity, content with any solution, provided it closed the subject. With a nod of his head he excused himself and left the cemetery, scraping the gate shut after him.

'Jean?'

Napier turned. Jacqui had moved further up the pathway and was studying a row of graves.

'Look at these,' she said as he joined her. 'They're all members of Eugenie's family.'

The Delaroche ancestors were clustered together. Some of the inscriptions dated back to the eighteenth century.

'You don't think Eugenie had anything to do with Schwartz being buried in this cemetery?' Jacqui asked.

'Could be.' As Napier spoke, the image of Eugenie standing on the steps of her house came to him. He saw the slight smile as she told him she had lied, that she remembered Schwartz.

Leaving the cemetery, they walked back along the ridge of the hillside above Honfleur, both quiet, still touched with the slight melancholy of the graveyard.

'Why did you say you weren't surprised when the curé told you that the grave had been vandalised?' she asked.

'Ashford knows that Schwartz stole *The Estuary Pilgrim*,' Napier explained. 'He would have worked it out, just as we did. He's bound to have wondered whether the painting wasn't buried in that grave.'

'So he dug up the coffin to see if *The Estuary Pilgrim* was locked away in it?'

'I imagine so.'

It was a gruesome picture—Ashford scrabbling in the earth, searching for his possession, his reward. Jacqui gave a shudder. 'It's getting cold, *chéri*,' she said. 'Let's go back now.'

They made their way down to the town and dined at the Tilbury, sharing an *assiette de fruits de mer*: oysters, clams and winkles piled on seaweed and crushed ice. Jacqui was radiant, vivacious, but

Napier found his mind drifting back to the graveyard above the estuary. He saw the headstone, the little jam jar and the flowers.

That night, after they had kissed good night in the shadowed doorway of Jacqui's apartment, he lay on his bed and stared up at the ceiling. The image of Eugenie returned to him, standing on the front steps of her house. Another came to him, thrusting unexpectedly into his mind. The quayside in the early morning, the trawlers swinging fish onto the shore.

The two linked, fused together, became an idea. Was it so improbable? Maybe not. The facts all fitted.

Reaching out, he took his travelling clock from the side table, directed the hands to six and set the alarm.

There was no harm in checking.

## Chapter Thirteen

The alarm broke into Napier's dream, tugging at his mind, pulling him up from his sleep. He rolled over in bed, reached out and switched it off. He looked at the luminous dial. Six in the morning.

With an effort he clambered out of bed.

Through the open shutters a cold dawn was breaking. He pulled on corduroy trousers and a heavy guernsey. He shaved, brushed his hair, tugged on his jacket and left the room. Down into the hallway, past the deserted reception desk and out onto the drive and up the road. Apple trees ghostly in the orchards, birds beginning to sing. A car swished by, searching ahead with orange headlights.

Notre-Dame de Grâce waited in the half-light, the roof and blunt belfry just silhouetted against the morning sky. Napier swung back the creaking cemetery gate. Inside, it was silent, breathless, preserving the stillness of night. He made his way over to Schwartz's grave. It was undisturbed, the wild flowers limp from their long vigil.

Napier picked his way among the ranks of standing tombs, searching for the position he wanted, finding it in a flat slab of blue-black marble. From here he had a clear view of both the cemetery gate and the yew tree that rose above Schwartz's grave. It would serve his purpose. He sat down and waited. Time crawled by. His mind drifted back to the night on the estuary.

A noise. Napier froze.

It was the latch of the gate. He watched it swing open, the slight creak of the hinges loud in the silence of the cemetery. Through the entrance came a figure, short and humped, wheeling a push-bike in

one hand. It was Eugenie's maid. Old Madeleine.

With a clatter she hefted the bicycle against the wall. Turning round, she stumped up the pathway, small mumbles of exertion issuing from her lips as she walked.

At Schwartz's grave Madeleine paused, a hand on her chin, the other claspings the elbow, surveying it with pleasure. Her plot of land, her possession. Stooping down, she brushed leaves off the grass and picked up the jam jar. Taking out the flowers, she threw them aside impatiently. Going over to a nearby bank, she began rummaging among the long grass for more.

Napier watched her in wonder. It was as he had expected. The childlike bunch of flowers, the Delaroche graves nearby, the sight of Madeleine on the quayside in the early-morning hours; he'd fitted the pieces together as he lay in bed the night before.

The old woman turned. Fresh flowers had been found and plucked from the ground. She fitted them into the jam jar and set them before the headstone in memory of a lover who had died forty years ago.

For they had been lovers, Madeleine and Schwartz. Napier was sure of it. Eugenie had almost confessed as much on that first day. Standing there on the steps, she had said she knew nothing about Schwartz—except that he had the strangest taste in women.

Eugenie had remembered Dietrich Schwartz because he had come to her not to discover the pleasures she arranged in the upstairs rooms, but to see a retarded Norman girl, to pay court to a maid. And the memory of that love still burned, rekindled each morning in this ceremony of wild flowers.

With a grunt of satisfaction Madeleine turned from the grave, trundled back to her bicycle and left the cemetery, banging the gate closed after her. There was a rasp of gravel as she set off towards the harbour to buy fish for the breakfast table.

ASHFORD DREW THE TELEPHONE across the desk towards him, lifted the receiver and dialled with his forefinger.

Jacqui's voice came on the line, eager and hopeful. 'Hello?'

'Good morning, my dear.'

He could sense the girl stiffen, recoiling at the sound of his voice.

'How are you this morning?'

Jacqui was collected now, formal and correct. 'I'm all right, thank you, Rupert.'

'And did you find time yesterday to invite Dr Napier over to the chateau?'

'No, Rupert.'

'But I specifically asked you to.'

'If you wish to see him, you must talk to him yourself. I'm not carrying messages for you.'

Ashford's eyes narrowed. How very annoying; the girl was becoming wayward, unpredictable in her behaviour.

'You know how important this is, my dear.'

There was a click, and the line went dead. Ashford removed the receiver from his ear and stared at it in surprise.

Jacqui had hung up on him.

Damn her! Louis was right. He should never have let her go. She knew too much, prying into the past, searching out secrets. But it was not too late. He prodded the bell on the desk beside him.

Louis was there in the doorway.

'Jacqui,' he said, staring across the polished floor, 'bring her to me. Pick her up, have her brought to the chateau.'

Louis accepted the order without comment.

Ashford paused and considered. 'On second thoughts, bring the others, too.' It would be risky. They'd need to cover their tracks, but it was necessary. 'Make it discreet, Louis. No fuss, no difficulties.'

'It'll take time.'

Ashford shook his head. 'We don't have time. I need them out of Honfleur today, before they think of going to the police.'

Louis was still standing in the doorway. 'May I ask you something, monsieur? The girl,' he said carefully, 'has meant you no harm . . . I wouldn't like to see her . . . hurt again.'

Ashford's face was cold and drawn. 'Bring her to me, Louis,' he said in the silence that settled in the room. 'Don't ask why; simply do as I tell you.'

SPOONER WAS HAVING BREAKFAST in the hotel dining room. Neat and fastidious in his table manners, the lozenge of his napkin symmetrical on his lap, he ate in silence.

He looked up as Napier joined him. 'You weren't in your room just now,' he said reprovingly.

'No. I went for a walk.'

Napier poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it thoughtfully. A little draught of conversation reached them from the nearby tables. This wasn't the place to tell Spooner of his morning in the cemetery. He waited until they had finished breakfast, and moved out into the garden, before bringing up the subject.

'Do you still have that Iron Cross?' he asked Spooner as they crossed the lawn, their footprints dark on the damp grass.

'You mean that medal they found on Barnabas's body? Certainly. I'll go and fetch it.'

Napier followed Spooner back into the hotel and waited for him in the corridor outside his room.

'Why the sudden interest?' Spooner asked as he emerged.

Napier took the Iron Cross and examined it once again. It was the last tangible link with Dietrich Schwartz. It had to be relevant.

'I'll show you,' he said, closing his hand around the medal and heading off along the passage and down the stairs.

Madeleine was in the hallway beneath them, sweeping. She paused as Napier approached. There was no anticipation on her face; the flat features were washed clean of expression.

Napier showed her the Iron Cross, opening his fingers like petals about the medal. 'Do you know this, Madeleine?' he asked gently. There was no reaction. Carefully he turned it round in his hand, showing the old woman the reverse side.

For some moments Madeleine stared at the name engraved on the rear face, and then slowly and cautiously she reached out one hand. A hand that was hard-skinned and wrinkled, a strong hand with short pointed fingers that closed about the Iron Cross, taking it from Napier, lifting it reverently from his palm.

'Dietrich,' she whispered. The word was a sigh.

'You knew him, didn't you, Madeleine?' Napier pressed, taking back the medal.

She nodded, her face radiant. Turning about, she marched over to the wall and propped her broom against the plaster. She returned and tugged at Napier's sleeve.

'Come,' she ordered.

With a glance at Spooner, who stood a few yards behind, Napier followed the old woman.

Down the badly lit passage Madeleine moved slowly on arthritic hips. She led the way into the kitchen and down a flight of stone steps, throwing open a door at the far end.

It was her bedroom, a clean whitewashed room, vaulted like a wine cellar. It was as plain as a hermit's cell. The floor was uncarpeted and resonant. A brass bedstead with polished knobs and quilted eider-down stood against the far wall, a wooden crucifix hanging above, and, nearby, a heavy oak wardrobe.

Napier paused in the doorway, Spooner close behind him, but Madeleine beckoned them in. She had gone over to the table by her bed and taken up a photograph that stood propped in a silver frame. Bringing it over to Napier, she held it up to him.



It showed a group of German officers, all smiling in their formal dress uniforms. Some sort of official occasion by the look of it. On the right an imposing figure with clipped hair and sharp intelligent eyes, Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel. He was shaking hands with a junior officer, a younger man with spectacles and a receding hairline. Madeleine pointed to a signature that had been scrawled beneath.

'Dietrich,' she announced proudly, stabbing her finger between the officer and the name, explaining the connection.

Napier appreciated the value this picture must have had to a junior adjutant, caught by the photographer at the very moment he shook hands with Rommel—the Desert Fox.

But what held Napier's attention was not Dietrich Schwartz or the smiling officers. For there, above their heads, caught in the flash of the camera, was a painting. Large and magnificent in its carved frame, instantly recognisable. *The Estuary Pilgrim*.

At that moment Madeleine pulled the photograph away, and turning the frame round, she gazed at it herself.

Napier reached towards her. 'May I see?'

She looked up at him. Seeing his outstretched hand, she clasped the picture to her bosom, her expression startled.

'I won't take it,' he promised.

Suddenly the eyes were flashing in anger. 'No!' she cried, backing away. 'It's mine, do you hear? Mine. It belongs to me!'

Napier paused, astonished by the ferocity of this outburst. Madeleine stood before him, crouching low, clutching her precious souvenir, wild and frightened, like a cornered animal.

On impulse he reached into his pocket and drew out the Iron Cross. He held it out to her. An offering, a fair exchange.

Madeleine hesitated, making up her mind. Then, timidly, she approached him, the little hand taking the medal from his opened palm. Meekly she handed him the photograph in return and retreated back across to her bed to examine the new acquisition.

Now that he had it close, Napier observed that it was not a photograph, but a cutting from a magazine. Beneath the printed picture was a caption, written in French. 'General Rommel talks with fellow officers on a tour of coastal defences.'

It was dated 'Honfleur, May 18, 1944'.

Taken two days after the convoy had been ambushed, it showed *The Estuary Pilgrim* still hanging on the wall. It was proof that the painting had not been destroyed at Criquetot.

Could this be it? Could this be the evidence Barnabas had promised to bring him, that he had set off to find?

‘How did you get in here?’

Napier and Spooner jumped at the sound, turning quickly in the little cell, both guilty as schoolboys.

Eugenie stood in the doorway—wary, poised and black as a raven, the dark eyes staring at Napier intently.

Madeleine stayed where she was, turning the medal round in her hands. Eugenie crossed the floor and sat down beside her, protective and reassuring, stroking the steel-grey hair.

‘How do you know this?’ she asked, glancing up at Napier.

‘I saw her putting flowers on Schwartz’s grave,’ he replied simply. ‘I guessed they must have been lovers.’

‘Not lovers,’ she said. ‘They were in love. It’s different.’

Madeleine had turned now and was listening to Eugenie, aware that she was being talked about.

‘It’s less surprising than it may seem,’ she added when Madeleine’s attention had wandered again. ‘She was a good-looking girl in those days. And there was no malice in her, you see. She had no grudge against the Germans.’ Eugenie smiled sadly.

Getting to her feet, she went over to Napier. ‘May I have it now?’ she asked. He handed her the photograph and she studied it thoughtfully for a moment. ‘Dietrich gave this picture to Madeleine shortly before he was killed. It’s very important to her.’

She set the frame back on the bedside table.

Napier’s voice was quiet. ‘So important that when Barnabas tried to take it from her, she killed him?’

There was fear in the dark eyes now.

‘You know this?’ Eugenie asked. ‘But how?’

He had seen it. Seen it in Madeleine’s terror, in the hunted, desperate expression on her face, in the explosion of fury when he tried to take the picture from her.

‘It was no loss,’ Eugenie said bitterly. ‘He was a despicable man, forever prodding and grasping. He deserved to die.’

‘How did he find the photo in the first place?’ Napier asked.

Eugenie jerked her head to where Madeleine was sitting, on the brass bed. ‘It was that medal,’ she said. ‘He’d discovered it in some junk shop in London, brought it with him. Madeleine saw it while she was making the beds.’

Napier could imagine Madeleine excited by the discovery, taking Barnabas by the arm, leading him down into her room to show him her precious picture.

‘He didn’t seem interested at the time,’ Eugenie continued.

‘But he came back.’

She nodded. 'Later that summer. He attempted to buy the picture from her but, of course, she wouldn't part with it. So he broke into the room one night and tried to steal it. Madeleine was in the kitchen peeling potatoes for the following day . . .'

Barnabas had returned, greedy and determined. Madeleine had heard a sound, come down to check. The electric light breaking into the darkness. Barnabas caught in the sudden glare. Leaning forward, bending over the table as he fumbled with the picture frame.

The blaze of anger, the wild, blind fury. Madeleine with the knife still in her hands. Plunging it down, driving the blade into his back.

'It was very quick,' Eugenie told him. 'He was dead by the time I arrived.'

'But he was found in the harbour,' Napier said.

Eugenie gave a shrug. 'That was Albert,' she said. 'I told him to take the body and dump it in the estuary, to let the current take it out to sea. Fool that he is, he miscalculated the tide.' She spat out her contempt. 'The body drifted right into the harbour.'

Spooner was incredulous. 'You attempted to dispose of the body?'

'Yes, of course,' Eugenie replied. 'Would you not have done the same? Madeleine remembers nothing of this. I doubt whether she even realises what it is we're talking about.'

They glanced across to where the old woman sat, gazing back at them with her deep Mediterranean eyes.

'If she has committed a crime, she doesn't know it. The whole affair has been forgotten.' Eugenie turned to Napier. 'And still can be, unless . . .'

She paused, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Napier looked round the little room, at the picture on the bedside table, at Madeleine with the medal in her hands. 'I'm not a policeman,' he said quietly. 'I can't see that this is any business of mine.'

LOUIS STARED into the distance. He had made the phone calls, issued his instructions. It was only a matter of time before Jacqui, Napier and the other man were picked up and brought to the chateau.

Sitting with his elbows set on parted knees, his hands locked together, Louis gazed into the future. He hadn't seen Ashford take the whip to Jacqui, but he had been within earshot. He'd heard the pain and the terror in her voice, seen the shock in her eyes as she ran down the stairs. Jacqui had been loyal to Ashford in her own way. Always there at the weekends to entertain his guests, smiling and gracious, never complaining. And that was how he had repaid her.

Louis twisted his hands together, the knuckles showing white through the skin. Was a similar fate in store for him? he wondered.

'I MUST GO BACK to London.'

'What, immediately?'

Spooner nodded, straightening his cuffs as he stood up. Now that the circumstances surrounding the death of Charles Barnabas had been explained, he had the information he needed.

'I thought you were going to the police.'

'Oh, I am,' Spooner assured him, 'but not here in France. It's essential that Ashford isn't alerted. This must be done properly, through the correct channels.'

They emerged from Eugenie's study into the passageway. They had spent over an hour talking in the little shuttered room, discussing the events of the last few days. It was a debriefing, Spooner told himself, the final assessment of their work.

At the reception desk he put a call through to Le Havre and booked himself a place on the afternoon ferry.

'The next boat leaves at four thirty,' he said, stepping out onto the balcony, where Napier leaned against the railing. 'I'll order a taxi to be here at three.'

Napier glanced at him. 'You don't need to do that,' he said quickly. 'Jacqui is coming here in a few minutes. We can drive you round to the docks in her car.'

Spooner beamed at the offer. That was far more satisfactory. 'In that case, I'll go and start my packing.' He hesitated in the doorway, looking back at Napier. 'I suppose there's no chance of you coming back to England too, is there?'

Napier smiled. 'Not at present.'

It was the girl, of course; he'd want to be with her. Spooner nodded his understanding. 'I'll ring you tomorrow around two thirty,' he said. 'Once I've set the ball rolling. And John . . .'

Napier glanced up at him.

'You won't attempt anything yourself, will you? Not until you've heard from me.'

'Nothing,' Napier promised.

## Chapter Fourteen

'I think he was sad to go,' Jacqui said.

Napier nodded. It was true. Spooner had been quite silent on the way over to Le Havre. When they'd arrived at the docks, he was preoccupied, collecting his tickets, covering his shyness with a brusque efficiency. Darting out his arm, he'd shaken hands with

Napier, then blushed crimson when Jacqui kissed him on both cheeks. With a hasty reminder to Napier that he would call the next day, he'd marched away, a short, nondescript man in a grey suit, dwarfed by the cranes and derricks and dreary concrete buildings of Le Havre.

'He nearly had a heart attack when you kissed him,' Napier said as the car bounced into Honfleur.

She shot him a mischievous smile. 'It was good for him,' she said, parking the car on the quayside, its headlights overlooking the water. 'Besides, he's really very sweet.'

They walked around the harbour, Jacqui clasping Napier's arm, and went up into the square, where the market was still in full swing. Brightly striped stalls clustered about the cathedral, noise and activity filling the open space. Threading through the crowd, they paused to have a drink in the Restaurant Sainte Catherine.

'We could buy some supper in the marketplace and have it at home tonight,' Jacqui suggested when they were ready to leave. 'There's a Renoir film on television . . .' Her voice trailed away. She had stiffened, straightening in her seat.

'What's the matter?' Napier asked.

'That man. I know him. He works for Rupert.'

'Which one?'

'In the denim jacket. Standing by the entrance.'

Napier could see him now. A little spider of a man with black hair and bowed legs. He was leaning against a stall.

'Are you sure?'

Jacqui nodded. 'Absolutely. His name is Willi. He was over at the chateau earlier this summer. I can remember him clearly.'

'Could be coincidence,' Napier said, turning back to her.

'No. He's watching us.'

'Well, we'll soon find out,' Napier said as he squeezed himself out from behind the table.

They strolled away from the restaurant and worked their way back into the market square, losing themselves in the crowd.

'Is he still with us?' Napier asked, stopping in front of a stall, looking it over. Stacked cheeses, ripe and pungent. 'Make it casual. Don't let him realise you've noticed.'

Her eyes swept listlessly across the square and then returned to Napier. 'Yes, *chéri*. He's following us.'

They moved on, quicker now, threading between late shoppers. Willi's eyes behind them, burning into their backs.

Not too fast, Napier told himself, keep it natural. Don't give the game away. 'Still with us?'



A flick of the tawny hair. 'Yes—definitely.'

It was Ashford; he was drawing in the net. But it didn't matter, Napier told himself as they hurried along. In a few hours Spooner would be back in London. The trap would be sprung. In the meantime all they had to do was keep out of the way.

'We must try to lose him,' he said to Jacqui. Fighting through jostling figures, past laden stalls. Vegetables fresh from the soil. Salami and smoked bacon and rabbits dangling on strings. Jacqui behind him, her hand feeling its way into his.

'I think there are two of them,' she cried. 'He keeps signalling to someone.'

Past the old belfry tower, their breath coming harder now. Pausing, undecided, looking for a way to escape.

Jacqui suddenly tugged at his arm. 'The church.'

'But it only has one entrance.'

'There's another.'

She led the way back across the square, into the wooden porch of Sainte Catherine's. Pushing open the door, slender hands on the heavy iron ring, drawing Napier in after her.

The silence of the vast interior engulfed them.

Hearts hammering, they walked up the nave of the church. Between dusty chairs laid out in rows, carved saints on every side, the evening light glowing in leaded windows.

The place was almost empty. A few figures sat staring at the altar; in the side aisle a woman was lighting a thin candle. No one looked at the couple who had burst into the reverent stillness. And no one noticed the door open for a second time.

Napier paused to look up into the cavern of vaulting, letting his gaze flow round the wooden beams, over sculpted gargoyles and ornamental corbels. He glanced down and could see Willi standing beside a man with a beard.

Napier couldn't believe they were going to try anything here, not in public, not with witnesses. But this wasn't just a routine surveillance. The two men were moving up the aisle.

'This way,' Jacqui breathed, urging Napier forward.

On up the nave of the cathedral, their footsteps loud and hollow in the silence. The altar before them, ornate with tarnished gilding, guarded by wrought-iron railings.

'There's a door,' Jacqui murmured, 'just to the left of us.'

Napier caught a glimpse of the door, set in the angle of the choir stall, close to the wall.

'It's a vestry; there's a way out on the other side.'

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. I used to go to confirmation classes in there.’

Strolling away from the altar, they stood against the wall. Napier, with his hands behind his back, peered up into the roof beams. Jacqui, beside him, pointed out a small detail.

The doorknob was in Napier’s hands; he turned it gently. There was a sudden loud creak as the catch slipped back. He felt the door give, opening from the wall.

Pushing it wide, he slipped Jacqui through, ducked his head beneath the lintel and followed after her.

Two steps down into a small, dark room. Roughly stacked chairs against the wall, cassocks heaped onto pegs.

The door slammed behind him. Napier heard a cry from the far side, imagined Willi’s surprise, his anger as he saw them vanish from his sight. Napier’s hand fumbled up the woodwork, found a bolt, thrust it across. The door was sealed.

Jacqui was pulling at his arm, her smile triumphant. She had found the outer door.

They were outside, back in the open once more, pigeons scattering from the ground as they ran. The crowds, the noise were around them again.

Down the flight of steps below the apse of the church. Running down the street, past open shop doors and racks of postcards. Jacqui and Napier reached the corner and turned into the harbour. It was safer here. They slowed their pace, cheeks flushed, pulses racing.

‘Have we lost them?’ Jacqui panted.

‘I think so.’

Evening had filled the waterside caf  s; the lights were coming on, inking in the buildings above. A band was playing, and there on the far shore was the juggler, going through his act.

‘Where do we go from here?’ Jacqui asked.

‘Somewhere, anywhere, provided it’s out of Honfleur.’ Grasping her by the hand, Napier headed off down the quayside towards the car. ‘And the sooner we get there the better.’

‘What do they want of us, Jean?’

‘I’m not entirely sure,’ Napier replied, ‘but I don’t think we should hang around to find out.’

He looked across the harbour to where the yellow Citro  n waited patiently on the far shore. It seemed so close, so easy to reach, just a short stroll away. They walked towards it, joining in with a group of young people, blending into the scene.

A quick glance back.

Willi was on the quayside now, looking across the harbour in their direction. But he hadn't spotted them; he was distracted, gazing down at the water.

Nearly there now. Don't rush it, just keep ambling along.

The crowd in front parted. A figure had stepped out, bowing low. 'Good evening, Dr Napier.'

The juggler stood before them. Red trousers, flat black shoes, smiling with his sharp white teeth.

'Are you going somewhere?' he enquired.

They ignored him, kept on walking towards the car.

His voice followed, mocking them, chiding in its tone. 'I imagine you'll be needing these.'

They spun round at his words. The juggler stood poised, the smile enticing and confident, his arm held out towards them.

Dangling from his finger were the keys to the car.

Jacqui clasped at her pockets, horrified.

'Please,' she said, 'give them to me.'

Stretching forward, he offered them to her. His hand shut and opened again. The fingers were splayed wide; the palm was empty. The keys had vanished.

A murmur of appreciation from the crowd. On the far shore Willi was watching, registering what he saw, beginning to move.

'For God's sake!' Jacqui cried in frustration.

Stepping close, the juggler reached into her coat, drawing the keys from her collar. A burst of clapping from the crowd. Jacqui snatched at the bundle of keys, but he flicked them away.

Willi was running now, calling to his companion.

There was no more time. Jumping forward, Napier took the juggler by his collar, grasping the feather-light body, throwing him back against the harbour wall.

A gasp from the audience, voices raised. 'Steady there . . . No need to lose your temper . . .'

Napier had him by the throat. The juggler hissed, his eyes fierce and malignant. The keys clattered across the cobbles. 'Take them,' he spat into Napier's face.

Jacqui snatched them up. Without pausing, she ran to the car.

Tossing the man aside, Napier followed, breaking out of the crowd.

'You drive,' she shouted as he reached her, throwing the bundle of keys across the roof.

The little car roared into life. Swinging it round, Napier crashed into first gear and headed down the quay. Figures scattering before the bonnet, surprised faces on either side.



'Where's Willi?'

'Behind . . . running after us . . . He's slowing down . . . I think he's giving up.'

Reaching the smooth tarmac of the road, the car began to pick up speed. In the mirror Napier caught a glimpse of Willi standing on the quay, bent over, heaving out deep breaths.

With the accelerator flat on the floor he drove out of Honfleur, Jacqui keeping watch out of the back.

'Do you think they could have a car?' she asked.

'Possibly.'

'Because there's one behind us.'

Napier adjusted the mirror. It was a red BMW, coming up fast, closing the distance effortlessly. There was no way they could outstrip it; the Citroën hadn't the power.

'Is it them?' he called out.

'I can't tell.'

With a shout of warning Napier wrenched on the steering wheel, grasping at the handbrake as he did so. The car spun round in the road, tyres squealing on the tarmac. Jacqui clutched at the dashboard as the car dived off into a side road.

The road wound up a hill, twisting between hedges and private houses. 'Any sign of them following?' Napier asked.

Jacqui shook her head. 'I think it was just a coincidence.'

They reached the crest of the hill. Trees loomed up on either side, darkening the road, the occasional snatched view of the estuary beyond, the distant lights of Le Havre glimmering on the water.

'Where are we going, *chéri*?' Jacqui asked.

Napier looked at her in the shadows. 'I haven't the faintest idea,' he replied, laughing at the confession.

He checked the mirror again. The road was clear.

'In here,' Jacqui cried suddenly, pointing to the left.

Napier swung the car off the road. Through high gates of exposed stone and wrought iron. It was a private driveway of some sort, bordered by rhododendrons and sculptured flowerbeds.

'Where on earth are we?'

'In a hotel. The Hôtel de la Grande Forêt.'

'Good God,' said Napier as they came round the corner. 'It looks like a sanatorium.'

The drive swept up to a massive façade. The Hôtel de la Grande Forêt stood silhouetted against the evening sky, its roof fretted into fairy-tale turrets and dormer windows.

'A sanatorium for those suffering from a surfeit of cash, by the look



of it,' he added. Parking the car, he switched off the engine. 'You go and see if they can take us. I'll get this car out of sight.'

Collecting her bag, Jacqui ran up the steps to the porch.

Napier left the Citroën and walked round the hotel, noting the formal gardens and manicured lawns. It was perfect, Napier thought. Willi could never follow them here. Sudden acts of premeditated violence wouldn't be permitted in a hotel such as this. The management wouldn't allow it.

The front doors opened. Two porters emerged, formal in white shirts and striped waistcoats. Between them, and a good head shorter in height, was a rotund figure in a black suit.

'Good evening, monsieur, and welcome to the Hôtel de la Grande Forêt. I am the manager.' He offered Napier a damp hand to shake. 'The comtesse is waiting for you indoors.'

'Is she just?' Napier replied evenly.

'So if you could be so good as to show us your car, these gentlemen will bring in your luggage.'

How very tactless of the comtesse not to admit that they had none, Napier observed to himself. Going across to the Citroën, he opened the boot. The only movable object was Jacqui's raincoat. Taking it out, Napier passed it to the nearest of the porters.

'The rest of the comtesse's luggage will be arriving shortly,' Napier told the manager gravely.

With a snap of his fingers the manager dismissed the two porters. He had grasped the situation. A beautiful young lady, well bred and expensively dressed but slightly flustered. Arriving without any booking in a ridiculous little car and without any luggage. It didn't take much to appreciate the arrangement.

'I was wondering whether I could move the car,' Napier murmured. 'Put it somewhere less conspicuous.'

The manager understood. Dropping his voice, he confided, 'There are garages round in the stable block for the convenience of residents.'

'AH, JEAN, THERE YOU ARE,' Jacqui purred as he came into the hotel drawing room. 'Have you managed to hide the car?'

'You mean did I park the comtesse's limousine?'

She blushed, suddenly coy. 'Oh . . . you heard?'

'It happened to slip out in conversation.'

'I had to call myself that. We would never have got in here otherwise. The manager told me they never allowed casual custom from the road. I could have smacked him.'

'And when he heard the title, the manager suddenly remembered he'd had a cancellation?'

'Exactly.' She paused, glancing at Napier with serious eyes. 'I'm afraid the rooms they've given us are rather different, Jean. They only had one good one. Yours is on the top floor; it's just a little matchbox.'

'Ideal for storing your spare luggage.'

'I couldn't see the prices,' she added, taking him by the arm, 'but I think it must be very expensive. Are we going to stay?'

'Do you want to?'

Jacqui's eyelids dropped for an instant, and her smile when she looked up at him was voluptuous.

'THERE'S NO ONE in here under seventy,' Jacqui whispered.

Napier looked round the hotel dining room, with its white-aproned waiters, its tasselled menus, the turtleback meat salver. 'You probably need seventy years to amass enough money to pay the bill.'

Jacqui giggled, leaning forward across the table, eyes shining in the light of the chandeliers.

The head waiter drew alongside their table, handsome in his tails, a white waistcoat stretched tight across his belly. 'Is everything to your satisfaction?'

'Yes, thank you—it was excellent.'

They had dined on fillet steak, carved into plump slices, and Jacqui had insisted they follow this with *crêpe suzettes*.

'And would you like coffee at the table, Comtesse, or in the drawing room?'

'Neither, thank you,' Jacqui replied, dismissing him with her dazzling smile.

Napier was surprised. 'Wouldn't you like something to drink?'

'Yes, *chéri*, but not here.' She was conspiratorial. Reaching out, she took Napier's hand in hers, drawing him out of the room.

In the hallway they met the manager, bobbing and pirouetting as he bade them good night. Carrying on up the staircase, Jacqui led the way along the passage.

'Do you think he knows I'm bringing you in here?' she asked as she searched for the key to her room.

'It would destroy his faith in humanity if you didn't.'

Closing the door behind her, she switched on low lights and hurried across the floor. Neatly hidden by the wardrobe was a small fridge. Kneeling down, Jacqui opened the door and drew out a half-bottle of champagne.

'Good thinking,' said Napier, throwing himself down on the bed. 'How did you know about that?'

'I found it earlier this evening.' She came back with two glasses, and kicking off her shoes, she sprawled down beside him.

Napier stripped off the wire cage and thumbed out the cork. It ricocheted across the ceiling, leaving the muzzle of the bottle smouldering with blue gases. He filled the glasses.

Jacqui touched her glass to her lips, watching him over the rim. 'I love champagne,' she said, lying back on the pillows. She nuzzled close to him, feeling the warmth of his body.

Napier slipped his arm round her. 'All we need is a little smoked salmon and we could survive a siege.'

'We could,' she agreed, 'except as soon as this is finished, you are going back to your room, aren't you, Jean?'

'You're referring to the little matchbox? Of course,' he promised. 'I have the key in my pocket.'

'Do you?'

'They gave it to me at the desk. It's strange, though,' he murmured, drawing his hand down the front of her shirt, releasing the top button and then the next. 'It fits your door as well as mine.'

Jacqui moved very slightly. 'Really?'

'It also has your number on it.'

She watched his hands through her lashes. 'And is that what has given you permission to start undressing me, Dr Napier?'

'Probably.' He parted the silk of her shirt.

'You weren't supposed to know,' she said softly. 'The hotel only had one room free. I had to take it . . .' she faltered, 'but I didn't want you to think . . .' Her voice trembled and fell away. She tried to speak, but the words failed her.

Diving her fingers into his hair, she drew him up to her lips.

THE CHANNEL FERRY ploughed forward into the night.

Spooner made his way down the companionway, holding onto the railing, bracing himself against the sluggish pitch of the hull.

In the duty-free shop he bought a bottle of Calvados. He very rarely drank spirits, but he thought he'd make an exception. This was a souvenir, something to remind him of his days in Normandy.

The girl at the till slipped the bottle into a bright yellow carrier bag, and he took it up onto the deck. It was quite deserted out there and suddenly cold in the wind.

Turning up his collar, Spooner leaned against the railing and peered down at the sea creaming away from the ship's side. He

thought of John Napier and of Jacqui, wondering where they were at that moment, what they were doing. A figure brushed by him, pausing by his shoulder to ask if he had a light.

Spooner turned at the sound of the voice.

As he did so, an expression of astonishment came over his face. It was not the question that had surprised him, nor the man's sudden movement as he stepped in close.

It was the agony of the knife sticking into his belly.

The blade had come from below, piercing his waistcoat just between the second and third buttons. Spooner reached down to touch it, but a second thrust of the knife threw him against the railing. The yellow carrier bag dropped from his hand, and he toppled back into the darkness.

## Chapter Fifteen

Napier stirred, lifting himself from the heavy drugging of sleep. There was a glow of pleasure as the memory of the previous night returned to him. Rolling over, he reached out his hand, but the other side of the bed was empty. Pulling himself up on his elbows, he looked across the room, now bright in the morning light.

Jacqui was standing on the balcony, admiring the view. Hearing him wake, she turned and stepped back through the French window. She was wearing his shirt, the upper buttons undone. Napier held out his arms towards her and she came into them, slipping onto the bed beside him.

'How are you this morning, my darling?' she whispered.

Pressing his face into warm hair, he kissed her behind the ear and for a few minutes they lay together, unconscious of anything beyond the embrace of their arms.

'What do we do today, Jean?' she said after a while.

'I must get back into Honfleur this morning.'

'But they'll be watching the hotel, *chéri*.'

'I know, but Spooner is going to ring at two thirty. I must be there to take the call.'

'Will I come too?'

'No, my love, you must stay here.' He took her hands, kissing the tips of her fingers. 'I'll be back just as soon as I've heard from Spooner.'

'But, Jean, I don't want to be left behind.'

'It's quite safe, my love; they'll never find you here.'

'HELLO, MARCEL?'

'Speaking.'

'This is Rupert . . . Rupert Ashford.'

The voice at the far end of the phone relaxed. 'Rupert, how very good to hear from you.'

'And you, Marcel.'

Marcel Lamartine was a producer at the local radio station. Ashford had invited him over to the chateau on more than one occasion. He'd found that it often paid to cultivate the media.

'What can I do for you, Rupert?'

'I was wondering if you could help me out with a minor problem. Just a small domestic crisis, Marcel. My chef had a tiff with his wife last night, ran off into the night.'

'I'm sorry . . .'

'It's no matter except unfortunately he took Jacqui's car as he went—that ridiculous little Citroën she drives.'

'So you'd like us to put something out over the air?'

'If you could,' Ashford mumbled, 'I'd be most grateful. I don't want to bother the police with the affair, but Jacqui will be so upset if the car is lost.'

'It's no problem.'

'Naturally I'll be offering a reward for the recovery. If I were to give you the registration number . . .'

NAPIER PARKED THE CITROËN a mile outside Honfleur.

Halting in a wooded stretch of the road, he reversed up a small farm track until the car was hidden from sight. He walked back to the road, approaching the town on foot. It was strangely quiet, the only sound the crunching of his shoes on the gritty surface of the road. It filled him with apprehension. He felt exposed and vulnerable.

Climbing up a bank, he ducked under a fence into an orchard. Napier moved quickly, keeping close to the cover of the apple trees. Scrambling through a gap in a hedge, he emerged onto the road three hundred yards above the Hôtel Delaroche.

He paused to consider his strategy. There was no chance of going in through the front; it was too easy for Ashford to have the entrance watched.

Crossing the road, Napier followed a footpath that took him round to the back wall of the hotel. It was eight foot tall, a forbidding barrier. The stump of a tree trunk gave him a way in. Clambering onto it, he threw his arms over the top of the wall and pulled himself up. He peered down into the gardens.



The hotel lay before him, serene and peaceful, its routine undisturbed. There was no sign of Willi or his friend. Napier dropped down into the garden. Casually he strolled across the lawn, entering through the French windows at the back of the house.

He met Eugenie in the passageway.

'Where the hell have you been?' she cried, her eyes dark and fierce with relief at seeing him. She drew him into her study, closing the door behind her. 'They were here looking for you.'

'How long ago?'

'Last night, two of them, and then again this morning.' Crossing the floor, Eugenie closed the shutters and, returning to her desk, she switched on a glass-shaded lamp. 'Where were you?'

He told her of their escape from Honfleur and the chance discovery of the Hôtel de la Grande Forêt.

In the glow of the lamp Eugenie regarded him seriously. 'You are going to get him, aren't you, John?'

'Who? Ashford? All we need is the means to bring him in. Spooner is about to ring me with instructions. That's why I'm here now.'

Her manner relaxed. Opening a walnut cabinet, she drew out a bottle of brandy, poured two glasses and handed one to Napier.

He glanced at his watch. It was two forty. Spooner should have called by now.

Eugenie noticed the gesture. 'He's probably been held up.'

'He's usually meticulous about timing.'

'Why don't you ring him yourself?'

Napier dialled London, listening to the staccato clicking of the relays as he was connected to the number. A crisp voice answered the phone. 'Wallace-Jones. Can I help you?'

In a few words Napier explained his business and asked to be put through to Spooner's office.

'I'm afraid he hasn't returned from France yet, Dr Napier.'

'But he left yesterday afternoon.'

The voice warmed slightly, becoming confidential. 'We did expect him this morning, but he hasn't put in an appearance yet.'

Thanking the man, Napier hung up.

Eugenie read his frown. 'Bad news?'

'Spooner hasn't arrived back in London.'

'Do you think something could have happened to him?'

It was possible, but what? he wondered.

'I think I should drive over to Le Havre,' he told her. 'Find out what's going on.'

Napier drained his glass, then paused. He was eager to be away,

but there was something he needed to know, something that made him turn in the doorway. 'Eugenie?'

'Yes, John?'

'Do you have *The Estuary Pilgrim*?'

In the silence of slippers feet she moved across the room until she stood before him. 'Why should you think such a thing?'

Because it was the only answer he had. Because every way he looked at the riddle of the past he was drawn back to the same conclusion. She had to have the painting.

'I believe Schwartz stole *The Estuary Pilgrim*,' he said. 'His orders were to bury it with the others, but he kept it for himself.'

'And you think he brought it here?'

'To give to Madeleine.'

For some moments Eugenie stared at him, and then with a little shrug she stepped away. 'Yes,' she said lightly. 'Dietrich brought that painting here one night. It was in a great steel canister in the back of a truck. He wanted Madeleine to hide it, store it away in the cellars. It was to be their insurance, their nest egg after the war.' She paused. 'Not that it did him any good—they murdered him the next day.'

'Murdered? I thought he was shot for deserting.'

She gave a thin, humourless smile. 'Desert? He would never have deserted. No. Dietrich was shot because he knew where those damned paintings had been hidden.'

It figured. Schwartz had known too much for his own good. He had carried out his orders, done as he was told, and never questioned the motives. For that he'd died.

'So what became of *The Estuary Pilgrim*?'

Eugenie shook her head. 'I've no idea. Dietrich took it away with him that night, and I never saw it again.'

It wasn't true—she knew where it was. Napier could sense it in the look of triumph that lit her eyes.

'You're lying,' he said quietly.

'Yes,' she replied, 'I'm lying.'

Turning away from him, Eugenie plunged her hands into her pockets. 'You're a clever man, John Napier. You've come into our lives, turned over memories, discovered secrets that have been buried for years. But not this one. *The Estuary Pilgrim* is not lost. It belongs to the past, and that's where it will remain.'

IN A PASSAGEWAY beyond the main hall of the hotel there was a row of boutiques. Jewellery arranged on black velvet trays, expensive gifts, cashmere jerseys and silk ties.

Jacqui inspected the curved glass windows. There might be a dress here she could buy for the evening, something to surprise Jean when he returned.

She stepped inside the tiny boutique.

There wasn't much choice, no more than a handful of dresses. Slipping one down from the rack, Jacqui held it against herself and reviewed the effect in the mirror. It hung a little lower than she liked but was of a delicate grey silk that matched her eyes. She checked the price tag. Four thousand francs. Hurriedly she put it back.

'Please don't move, mademoiselle.'

A male voice, clipped and authoritative.

Jacqui spun round.

It was Willi. 'You will come with us, mademoiselle. I have a gun in my pocket. If you try to run, I have instructions to shoot you.' He beckoned towards the entrance.

Meekly she stepped out of the boutique. The man with the beard was there, lounging against the wall, covering her escape. He straightened as she appeared, falling in beside her as they headed down the broad passage.

Jacqui could feel herself trembling. It was shock more than fear. Willi shouldn't be here. The hotel had been safe.

Across the hall, her heels silent in the thick pile of the carpet. A few heads turned to watch them.

The manager was busy at the reception desk. He averted his eyes as they passed—such an unpleasant incident, really most unsavoury. The sooner it was over, the better.

This was the culprit, Jacqui realised. She could read the guilt in his affected disinterest. Despicable man. How had he done it?

A blue Rolls was parked in the drive.

Running down the steps, the man with the beard opened the rear door. Grasping Jacqui's arm, he thrust her into the car, ramming in beside her, sitting with his body pressed hard against hers.

Willi took the wheel, swinging the car up the drive and out into the road.

'WHAT WAS THE NAME again, sir?'

'Spooner. Edward Spooner.'

The port official tapped plastic keys, scanning the computer screen from beneath the peak of his cap.

Napier glanced round the small dockside office as he waited for a response. Through the window he could see the Channel ferry manoeuvring itself against the quayside.

'Here we are, sir.'

Napier jerked his attention back to the desk.

'Mr E. Spooner. He was booked on the four-thirty ferry yesterday afternoon.'

'And did he go on board?'

'The ticket was accepted at emigration.'

'But do you know whether he disembarked at the other end?'

'I don't quite follow you, sir.'

'He hasn't arrived in London yet,' Napier explained cautiously. 'I just want to be certain he left the ship this morning.'

The officer sucked on his teeth. 'You'd have to check with British immigration, sir. We don't have that information.'

Napier grunted his understanding. Thanking the officer, he walked out across the quayside to where the Citroën was parked.

ASHFORD WAS WAITING for them in the gallery.

His manner was calm and relaxed. Behind him a log fire was burning in the grate. Tall and gaunt in his pale grey suit, a silk cravat wrapped round his neck, he watched as Jacqui was brought into the room. Willi and his bearded associate on either side, Louis behind them, pausing in the doorway.

Jacqui strode across the floor towards him, her eyes blazing. Willi tried to hold her, but she snatched her arm away from him.

'How dare you do this to me, Rupert!' she hissed. 'Why am I here? What do you want of me?'

'You have only yourself to blame, my dear,' Ashford replied quietly. 'If you had done as I asked, none of this would have been necessary.'

'You behave as though you own me, as though I was put here for your convenience.'

A flicker of irritation crossed Ashford's face. He turned away, cutting short her outburst. 'We're wasting time. I wish to know where Dr Napier has gone.'

Jacqui hesitated. There was a spark of hope in the question. Jean was free; they hadn't managed to catch him yet. He'd be coming. When he found her gone from the hotel, he'd follow. All she had to do was delay, to play for time.

'I've no idea,' she replied curtly. 'He didn't tell me.'

Ashford turned, reading her mind. 'Don't think for a moment that he will escape, my dear. It is simply a matter of time before he returns to that hotel of yours. I only wish to know where he has been in the meantime.'

'I'm not going to tell you anything, Rupert.'

'You will answer me, my dear.'

Her eyebrows arched at the tone of his voice. She lowered her head, studying her feet in silence.

'Don't get sulky with me, girl!' Stepping forward, Ashford seized her by the chin, jerking her head up to his.

Jacqui's eyes flashed at the touch. Lifting her shoulders, she spat into his face. It was unpremeditated, an instinctive reaction.

Ashford recoiled with a cry of disgust. Twisting the handkerchief from his upper pocket, he wiped it across his face.

'You little slut.' He was white and shaking, incensed by her attack, but he brought himself under control. He tucked the handkerchief back in place, and his expression grew thoughtful, deliberate. Without taking his eyes off Jacqui, he reached out his hand to one side, the palm upward, spreading his fingers.

Willi understood the gesture. It was a command, a mute instruction, a surgeon requesting the scalpel. Drawing out his knife, he placed it in Ashford's waiting hand.

'Hold her,' he whispered.

Willi caught her wrists, twisting her arms behind her back.

'Now, my dear, you will tell me where he has gone.'

There was a click, and the thin silver tongue of the knife flicked out at Ashford's touch. Reaching forward, he laid the knife on her brow, the tip of the blade resting between her eyes.

She tensed at the touch, pulling back her head. He wouldn't cut her, not in cold blood, she told herself. He wants to see you crumple, to see you humiliated, begging for mercy.

Well, damn him!

Gently Ashford ran the blade across her face, down her nose, onto her mouth. He seemed fascinated by the sight. His eyes were red-rimmed. One alert, watching the passage of the knife, the other slack and dull. Jacqui could feel the tickle of the blade on her flesh as it tracked down the curve of her chin.

With an imperceptible movement of the hand Ashford increased the pressure, digging the knife into her flesh. A bead of blood ran down her neck. And then the knife was withdrawn.

Ashford's voice was reasonable. 'No, my dear, I don't intend to hurt you. That would be a crude solution—Willi's method, not mine.'

He was speaking softly, watching her, judging her reaction.

Suddenly he reached up, slipping the blade into her hair. She gave a cry, jerking her head away. But it was done. With a quick twitch of the wrist Ashford had cut off a lock of her hair.



He held it up to her, noting her look of horror.

'You didn't like that, did you, my dear?' He spoke deliberately, his tongue caressing the words. 'You're proud of your beauty, aren't you? You like to have men admiring you, setting you up on a pedestal.' He dropped the golden lock, watching it float down to the floor. 'But what if you were to lose all this fine hair?'

Jacqui gave a little moan. She'd seen pictures of collaborators shaved by the Resistance in the war. White skulls hanging heavy and ungainly, fragile as eggshells. The image filled her with a sudden unreasonable terror.

'Not that,' she pleaded. 'Oh, please, not that.'

'What would you look like then?' he wondered.

The nightmare image of those plucked heads possessed her. Throwing herself to one side, she struggled to break free, but Willi gripped her tightly, twisting her arm until she cried out.

'You wouldn't be so fascinating, would you, my dear? You'd be ugly and deformed.'

Kicking back her legs, Jacqui fell to her knees, choking, panting for breath, confused and bewildered.

Ashford stood above, looking down at the sobbing figure prostrated before him.

A MILE OUTSIDE HONFLEUR, Napier drew in to the kerb. Jumping out of the car, he crossed the road and went into a café.

The *patron* was leaning against the counter, talking to two locals. Napier ordered coffee, and taking it over to a table by the window, he drank it thoughtfully.

Something had happened to Spooner; he was sure of it. There was no other explanation. And if Spooner hadn't managed to reach London, the situation was changed—the odds were suddenly stacked against them.

For ten minutes Napier sat turning the problem over in his mind, considering the options open to him, and then, going back to the counter, he asked the *patron* if he could use the phone.

Ten minutes later the door opened and Chief Inspector Chaumière stumped into the café, raincoat swept back, hands dug into baggy trouser pockets. His expression was disgruntled, that of a man taken away from his family on a Sunday night.

Napier began to speak, to offer a more detailed explanation than he'd given on the phone, but Chaumière held up his hands, staunching the words. 'Tell me later,' he said quietly. He beckoned Napier towards the door. They went out. Two police cars were parked

outside, their blue lights flicking round the buildings.

'Rupert Ashford,' Chaumière said. 'Do you know the way to his house?'

Napier nodded. 'Yes . . . but why?'

Chaumière nodded towards the nearest police car. 'Get in. I'll explain on the way over.'

## Chapter Sixteen

Jacqui rolled over on the bed. Twisting round, she tried to reach down to the knot that bound her wrists, but it was hopeless. Willi had tied her skilfully, lashing each arm separately before securing them together and strapping them onto the brass bedpost. There was no chance of escape.

She was high in an attic room hardly large enough to contain the bed. An oval boar's-eye window threw a pale phosphorescence on the darkened ceiling.

Her wrists looked so close, so easy to reach.

Digging her head down into the mattress, Jacqui curled herself round, like a puppy straining at the leash, and tried once more.

There was a sound outside in the passage.

Quickly she righted herself. Rupert had given her an hour before he returned for his answer. 'Consider the alternatives in the meantime,' he'd said as he left the gallery.

A rasp of the key in the lock, and the door swung open.

It was Louis. For a moment he stood in the doorway, short and powerful, his figure dark against the dull light of the passage, and then, closing the door behind him, he walked over to the bed.

Jacqui shrank back, bunching up her legs to lash out at him. Seeing her tensed, ready to strike, Louis gave a quick shake of his head and touched his fingers to his lips. Jacqui hesitated.

Kneeling down beside the bed, Louis began to untie the ropes around her wrists.

'Get out of the house,' he told her as the ropes came free. 'Stay out—hide in the darkness until it's safe.'

Jacqui, nursing chafed wrists, was startled as much as relieved by his words. Louis was Rupert's man, the instrument of his will.

It had never occurred to her that he might act of his own accord. He was taking a terrible risk.

'You mustn't do this, Louis,' she whispered urgently. 'Rupert will never forgive you.'

The hollow eyes told her that he knew this to be true.

'I have rung the police,' he explained quietly. 'They will be here in a few minutes. You must keep out of harm's way until they arrive.' Taking her hands, he helped her to her feet.

'But what about Willi?'

'He's gone. They've both been sent back to that hotel where you stayed last night.'

Cautiously Louis opened the door, checking that the way was clear. Slipping off her shoes, she followed him.

Down an attic staircase, the silence hanging heavy as ground mist, the creaking of the steps loud in their ears. Louis moving ahead, feeling his way through the dark. Jacqui close behind, keeping near to his protection.

Another staircase, and the entrance hallway was beneath them. Louis paused on the stairs, turning back to her. He pointed across the floor to where a crack of light showed beneath the study door.

Taking her by the arm, he led the way across the floor.

'Don't look back,' he whispered into her ear. 'As soon as you're outside, run for the trees.'

Soundlessly they ran towards the door. Jacqui's teeth flashed in a smile of excitement; the fierce joy of escape was on her. She turned to speak to Louis, to make some sign of thanks, but he had already stepped ahead of her, reaching out to open the door.

He touched the handle and the hall lights crashed on.

Jacqui gave a cry of fright. She swung round towards the study door, but it was still closed.

Ashford was above them, at the head of the stairs.

'Bring her back, Louis.'

Rupert held himself erect as he issued the command. One hand was folded behind his back. The other carried a gun.

'Do as I say.'

Louis shook his head. 'No, monsieur. It has gone too far.'

'Don't be a fool, Louis.'

'I've called the police . . . They will be arriving shortly. It's finished, monsieur.'

As he spoke, Louis turned to Jacqui, taking her by the shoulders, pushing her roughly towards the door.

'Get out,' he ordered.

Ashford's voice pierced the stillness. 'Stay where you are.'

Louis had already reached down to the handle. He was opening the door, thrusting her into the night. 'Get out!'

His voice was lost in the explosion of the gun. The bullet struck him

between the shoulder blades as he was turning, covering her escape. The shock threw him forward into Jacqui's arms, a violent embrace, his body suddenly heavy as the strength left him, pulling her down onto her knees.

Jacqui didn't look up, didn't see Ashford raising the gun once more, for Louis was lying on her lap, his eyes open. He was trying to speak, but his teeth were clenched. There was a great strain in his body, a twisting pain that arched his back. She ran her hand across his face, stroking him, calming him. And then it was over; the breath rushed out of his lungs and his shoulders fell.

Lifting her face to the staircase, Jacqui gazed up at Ashford, at the muzzle of the gun as it levelled on her.

'BUT WHAT DID he say exactly?'

'Not much,' replied Chaumière, bracing himself against the roll of the police car as they swung round a corner. 'He said that Made-moiselle Fontenay was being held at the chateau against her will and that he feared for her safety.'

'The caller didn't give his name, I suppose?'

Chaumière shook his head. 'He only said a few words, gave his information and hung up.'

Napier's mind was racing with speculation. Leaning forward, he gave the driver hasty directions, exorcising his impatience in the urgency of his commands.

'How much further?' Chaumière asked, catching something of his apprehension.

'About a mile.'

The car lifted over the crest of the hill, bobbing as the suspension took the weight once more. Napier craning forward, searching through the moonlight, pointing towards the entrance to the chateau.

'In there!' he cried. 'On the left, through those gates.'

#### THE GUN HELD STEADY.

Jacqui saw the short snout of its barrel pointing towards her; she heard the two sharp clicks as the hammer was drawn back.

Carefully she laid Louis down on the floor and, straightening up, she stood before Ashford, unaware of the blood on her arms and on her shirt, of her tangled mane of hair golden in the light.

In the distance a siren was wailing.

Jacqui looked up at Ashford, waiting for the roar of the gun, the impact of the bullet. But he hesitated. The thin, insistent wail of the siren had touched him, broken his concentration.

The muzzle of the gun wavered in his hand.

The sirens grew louder. Flashing blue lights broke in through the high windows, playing on the ceiling, flickering in the darkness. They seemed to have captivated him, to have entranced him.

Seizing the moment, Jacqui turned and ran out of the opened door, down the stone steps, stumbling in her haste. A car was parked below; others were flooding up the driveway. Soon doors were opening, voices calling to her.

Napier was there first, his face white with concern, catching her in his arms.

She was laughing and crying at the same time. There was no weight to her body; her legs were giving way. Pressing her face into Jean's neck, she held him, feeling the warmth of his body against hers, hearing his voice in her ear.

'It's all right, my love. It's all right . . . You're safe now.'

ASHFORD STOOD AT THE HEAD of the stairs and looked down through the high windows.

He saw the headlights streaming up the driveway, heard the doors opening, watched the uniformed figures as they closed in.

Slowly he raised his arm; the revolver was still in his hand. He placed it on the carved banister. He didn't need that any more.

The ache in his eye was growing worse. His face felt puffed and bruised from the beating it had taken. In the distance the bells of Sainte Catherine's were tolling.

It was six in the morning. Ashford was standing at the window of his prison cell once more, looking down into the grey yard, watching the corporal forming his men up into line. He could see their hard weather-beaten faces, the green-grey uniforms. The clatter of their weapons was loud in the confined space.

They'd be coming to get him now. The cell door would burst open. He'd be dragged out into the yard.

It was finished.

Turning round, Ashford walked back into the gallery. He closed the doors behind him and locked them. The flashing lights, the raised voices were shut out. He drew out the long silver key and began to unlock the wall panels, swinging back the doors, revealing each painting in turn.

When every door was opened, he walked across to the fireplace. Reaching into the flames, he caught hold of one log and dragged it out. He carried the burning log into the centre of the floor and dropped it on the polished boards.



Crossing over to the furthest of the opened panels, Ashford lifted down a painting. It was a view of the estuary by Boudin: a painting with sun-washed skies and spring breezes, a painting of a better world. He threw it down onto the burning log.

At first it smothered the flames, the cool blues of sea and open sky drowning the heat. Then the canvas blackened, a small hole appeared in the upper corner, the fire eating greedily across the surface of the picture, and it was gone, the paint blistering, the sunlight disappearing into ashes.

Taking another, Ashford dropped it over the burning frame of the little Boudin, then the next, working more quickly now, not watching the fire that engulfed them, no longer caring.

CROUCHING LOW, Napier approached the chateau.

Behind him was Chaumière, bent double as he scuttled across the drive. He was carrying a gun.

Napier hadn't given a reason for coming forward, and Chaumière hadn't questioned him. He knew the layout of the house; he knew Ashford. That was reason enough.

In front of them were the steps of the chateau. The door was open, and the lights of the hallway poured out onto the carved stonework.

Napier had only the vaguest image of the events that had taken place in the chateau during the last few hours. Jacqui had tried to explain, but it had been nothing more than disjointed sentences without sense or sequence: Ashford firing a gun, Louis setting her free, the ropes that had held her.

Napier moved forward, inching his way up the stone steps. Chaumière was beside him, checking that the chamber of his gun was loaded. Napier looked round the door. The hall was empty.

Louis was sprawled across the entrance. Arms spread, eyes wide, he lay still and alone, strangely incongruous in the splendour of the deserted hall.

Chaumière lowered the gun and stepped inside, glancing about. Turning back to the driveway, he beckoned with his arm. A handful of uniformed police broke through the lights and clattered up the steps behind them.

Quickly they combed the lower floor, bursting open doors, searching the rooms with practised, ritualised movements.

'The gallery,' Napier said.

Chaumière nodded.

Running up the stairs, they paused on the landing. Ashford's revolver lay on the banister. Chaumière showed it to Napier.

'I don't think we need the precautions any longer.'

'I shouldn't be too sure.' Napier touched a door handle and sprang back in surprise.

'What's the matter?'

'It's hot.'

Cautiously he put his palm against the wooden surface, feeling the glow of warmth. A fine blade of smoke was dribbling under the doors.

'My God, the room's on fire.'

'Kick it open,' Chaumière ordered.

'It'll fan the flames.'

Taking a pace back, Chaumière stamped his foot against the doors, the blow landing just beneath the handles. He tried again. Napier joined him, throwing his weight against the lock, feeling the doors begin to sag. On the fourth attempt the doors gave way, bursting inwards with a loud crash of splintering wood.

There was a gasp of suction, dragging at their clothes and hair. A searing heat belched out at them. The long gallery was a tunnel of fire. Hungry flames licked round the walls and ceiling, twisting and swirling, drawing back at the sudden intake of air, gathering strength from the oxygen, pouring forward again.

Napier had only a brief glimpse of the burning gallery before he leaped aside, throwing his arms up before his eyes.

In that instant he had a clear view of the inferno: the blazing outlines of opened panel doors, the fire streaming up the painted surfaces, a pile of pictures in the centre of the floor, priceless canvases peeling and curling like burning leaves, flames reaching out, rolling up and over.

It might have been his imagination, a trick of the light, but in that split second, as he gazed into the ruins, Napier was sure that he saw the dark outline of a man. A pillar of fire, standing above the pyre.

Above his head he held a painting.

He was throwing it down on the fire, losing balance, toppling after it. Pitching himself forward into the burning core.

## Chapter Seventeen

'So what became of *The Estuary Pilgrim*?'

'It's anyone's guess,' Napier replied.

'You've no theory of your own?'

'Eugenie told me that Schwartz had the painting on the night

before he died, that he drove away taking it with him.'

Charles Picard took a sip of white wine and stared out across the dusty court. Napier sat opposite. Jacqui was beside Napier, her arm on the back of his chair, the tips of her fingers making secret movements across his back.

Picard said, 'So it could be anywhere. Still buried in the ground or hidden away in some cellar.'

'Or it could have been destroyed,' Jacqui said.

They had spent the morning in Picard's office, in Paris, telling him all they knew. How Ashford had conspired with von Eichendorff to hide the paintings, how he later had them faked and kept the originals for himself. Of his alliance with Enrique de la Pena. They'd described Ashford's attempts to silence them, the death of Louis, and Jacqui's escape from the chateau.

Picard had heard them out patiently, asking the occasional question, prompting them to continue. But it was only after they had walked to a restaurant in the Palais Royal, only now as lunch was drawing to a close that he asked what had become of *The Estuary Pilgrim*.

'So you have no private thoughts of your own?'

Napier smiled. 'If I do, I'll probably keep them to myself.'

'You know the fake is going to the Musée d'Orsay? They're going to hang it there until such time as the original is discovered.' Picard gave a little shrug. 'A fake is better than nothing.'

Napier nodded. The huge painting would be a sensation in its own way. But it wasn't the original. That was lost. The real painting belonged to the past, just as Eugenie had said. It would never be discovered.

Jacqui stirred, standing up with a smile. 'Will you excuse me a moment?'

Picard leaped to his feet, watching her as she went into the dark interior of the restaurant, tall and chic in her smart suit with a full skirt over polished black boots.

His manner was confidential as they sat down again.

'Is she all right? It must have been a terrible ordeal for her.'

'She'll put it behind her,' Napier replied. He didn't tell Picard of the nightmares, didn't tell him of the nights she had woken sweating and shaking, her eyes panic-stricken as she relived the last moments in Ashford's house.

'You know, as the only legal heir she stands to be a very rich young lady. There'll be an inquest and heavy duties to pay, but much of Ashford's empire was legitimate.'

Whether Jacqui would accept it was another matter. Only that morning she had said she wanted nothing to do with Ashford. 'I'm free of him now, Jean, finally and completely. I wouldn't mind if I never heard his name mentioned again.'

Picard had jumped to his feet.

'We were talking about you,' he said to Jacqui as she returned.

'Something complimentary, I hope.'

'Naturally,' he replied with his quick, nervous laugh and, turning to Napier, he held out his hand. 'And now I must leave you both. Unfortunately, there are other affairs I must attend to this afternoon.' His voice dropped. 'The bill is taken care of, so if there is anything else you want . . .' A flourish completed the sentence.

When he had gone, Jacqui sat down opposite Napier, taking his hand in hers. 'Did he mean that, do you think?'

'I'm sure—it's the taxpayers' money.'

'And do you think they could rise to a bottle of champagne?'

'I thought you had an important appointment with the shops this afternoon?'

'They'll wait,' she told him, turning to catch the waiter's attention.

It was almost four by the time they left the table.

Linking their arms round each other, hips pressed close together, they walked across the court of the Palais Royal. As they passed beneath an archway, in the shadow of stone by the Comédie-Française, Jacqui turned to him.

'Do you think they'll ever discover the original painting?'

Napier shook his head. 'It was lost many years ago.'

She looked at him, serious as a small child. 'But you told Picard that you hadn't any idea where it was, *chéri*.'

'I did,' he admitted, 'but that wasn't entirely true. The picture was destroyed just after the war. It will never replace the fake in the Musée d'Orsay.'

'Why did you not say so?'

'Because it would make no difference, my love. What was done then cannot be undone. The picture is gone.'

'But how do you know this, Jean?'

Napier made no reply to her question but walked out into the friendly bustle of the street. The yellow Citroën was parked at the kerb nearby. Opening the boot, he drew out a large flat package. Jacqui watched as he took a penknife from his pocket and cut the string, stripping away the brown paper wrapping.

He held it up for her to see.

It was the nude painting that had hung in Spooner's room.

'Eugenie gave this to me this morning,' he told her, 'just before we left the hotel.' He propped the painting on the bonnet of the car.

'This was just one of several pictures that Eugenie had done of herself. There must have been twenty or thirty of them originally, all looking much the same as this.'

Eugenie's smile was triumphant as she gazed from the painting.

'Over the years she sold the others to Ashford. But for some reason she kept this last one back. Then, when she heard of Ashford's death, she gave it to me.'

As he was speaking, Napier ran the knife over one corner of the canvas, gently scraping at the surface.

The paint came away, dry as plaster.

Behind them the cars hooted and jostled in the street. The bonnet of the Citroën was warm in the sun. Jacqui leaned over his shoulder, watching him working on the picture.

And then she saw it.

Through the sugared pinks, the pale peppermints and oranges of bare flesh, a patch of green paint had appeared.

She knew it, recognised it instinctively.

It was a deep viridian green. The colour of water. The colour of translucent reflections, of sunlight on the harbour at Honfleur.

A fragment of the painting known as *The Estuary Pilgrim*.



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## DOUGLAS SKEGGS

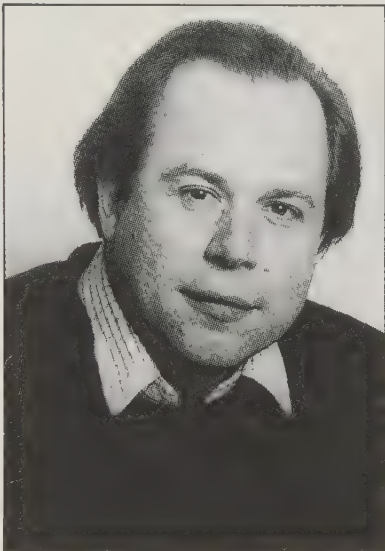
Talking with author Douglas Skeggs feels a bit like stepping into the pages of *The Estuary Pilgrim*. Like his hero, John Napier, Douglas Skeggs is an internationally recognised authority on nineteenth-century French painting. He has been called in professionally on questions of forgery. And, yes, like Napier, he has written a book about Monet—a study entitled *River of Light*. But, Douglas Skeggs insists, he is *not* John Napier. ‘Napier,’ he says mischievously, ‘knows a lot more than I do about Monet.’

Skeggs got the idea for *The Estuary Pilgrim* while researching *River of Light*. He learned that two of Monet’s paintings of the harbour at Honfleur are, in fact, lost. Suppose a clever forger were to reproduce one of these masterpieces, Skeggs wondered. What problems would he face? And what methods could an art historian use to uncover the fraud?

When he sat down to write, the author knew exactly what he intended to do. ‘I lecture around England and spend hours and hours travelling on trains and reading novels,’ he explains. ‘So I was determined to write just the kind of book I always hope to find in the railway station when I’m setting out on a journey, a book that gets you lost in another world.’ Readers of *The Estuary Pilgrim* will agree that he has succeeded brilliantly.

Douglas Skeggs and his wife, Imogene, live in London, where he is a director of the New Academy for Fine Art Studies. In addition to maintaining a busy writing and lecturing schedule, he is also a talented painter whose work has been exhibited in England and on the Continent. Asked to compare his two creative pursuits, Skeggs says, ‘Whether I’m painting or writing, it’s actually the same thing. It comes out in a different medium, but it’s the same visual imagery and the same creative urge.’

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# The Bear

*by James Oliver Curwood*

*Illustrated by Bob Crawford*

*He was Thor, the giant  
grizzly, the king of the  
mountains. His domain  
was the majestic Canadian  
Rockies, an untouched  
paradise of free-flowing  
rivers and virgin forests.  
Feared by all the other  
wild creatures, he himself  
feared nothing.*

*Until suddenly a new  
enemy—man—came into  
his world . . .*

## Chapter One

With the silence and immobility of a great reddish-tinted rock, Thor stood for many minutes looking out over his domain. He could not see far, for, like all grizzlies, his eyes were small and far apart, and his vision was bad. At a distance of a third or a half a mile he could make out a goat or a mountain sheep, but beyond that his world was a vast sun-filled or night-darkened mystery through which he ranged mostly by the guidance of sound and smell.

It was the sense of smell that held him motionless now. Up out of the valley had come a scent that he had never smelled before. It stirred him strangely as his slow-working brute mind struggled to comprehend it. It was not caribou, for he had killed many caribou; it was not goat; it was not sheep; and it was not the smell of the fat and lazy whistling marmots sunning themselves on the rocks. It was a scent that did not enrage him, and neither did it frighten him.

Thor stood at the edge of a little plain, with the valley an eighth of a mile below him and the break over which he had come that afternoon an eighth of a mile above him. The plain was very much like a cup, perhaps an acre in extent, in the green slope of the mountain. It was covered with rich, soft grass and June flowers—mountain violets and patches of forget-me-nots, and wild asters and hyacinths—and in the centre of it was a fifty-foot spatter of soft mud that Thor visited frequently when his feet became rocksores. To the east and the west and the north of him spread out the wonderful panorama of the Canadian Rockies, eternally snow-covered up near the clouds, now softened in the golden sunshine of a June afternoon.



June and July—the last of spring and the first of summer in the northern mountains—were commingling. The music of running water was in the air. The earth was bursting with green, the early flowers were turning the sunny slopes into coloured splashes of red and white and purple, and everything that had life was singing—the pompous little gophers on their mounds, the big bumblebees that buzzed from flower to flower, the eagles over the peaks. Even Thor was singing in his way; he had paddled through the soft mud a few minutes ago, rumbling curiously deep down in his great chest. It was not a growl or a roar or a snarl; it was the noise he made when he was contented. It was his song.

And now, for some mysterious reason, there had suddenly come a change in this wonderful day for him. Motionless, he still sniffed the wind. The new and puzzling smell that was in the air disquieted him without alarming him. And then, at last, a low and sullen growl came, like a distant roll of thunder, from out of his chest. He was overlord of these domains, and his brain told him that there should be no smell that he could not comprehend and of which he was not the master.

Thor reared up slowly, until the whole nine feet of him rested on his haunches, and he sat like a trained dog, with his great forefeet, heavy with mud, drooping in front of his chest. For ten years he had lived in these mountains, and never had he smelled that smell. He defied it. He did not hide himself. Unafraid, he stood up.

His new June coat shone a golden brown in the sun. His forearms were almost as large as a man's body; the three largest of his five knifelike claws were five and a half inches long; in the mud his feet had left tracks that were fifteen inches from tip to tip. He was fat and sleek and powerful. His eyes, no larger than hickory nuts, were eight inches apart. His two upper fangs, sharp as stiletto points, were as long as a man's thumb, and between his great jaws he could crush the neck of a caribou.

Like most grizzlies, Thor did not kill for the pleasure of killing. Out of a herd he would take one caribou, and he would eat that caribou to the marrow in the last bone. He was a peaceful king. He had one law: Let me alone! He was hated and he was feared, but he was without hatred or fear of his own. Therefore he waited openly for the strange thing that was coming to him from down the valley.

For ten minutes he sat like a carved thing on his haunches, questioning the taint that was in his nostrils. Then the wind shifted, and the scent grew less and less, until it was gone altogether. Thor's flat ears lifted a little. He turned his huge head slowly so that his eyes took in the green slope and the tiny plain. He easily forgot the smell

now that the air was clear and sweet again. He dropped on his four feet and resumed his gopher-hunting.

Thor weighed a thousand pounds; a mountain gopher is six inches long and weighs six ounces. Yet Thor would dig energetically for an hour and rejoice at the end by swallowing the fat little gopher like a pill; it was the luscious titbit in the quest of which he spent a third of his spring and summer digging.

A MILE DOWN THE VALLEY, Jim Langdon stopped his horse where the spruce and balsam timber thinned out at the mouth of a coulée. He swung his right leg over the horn of his saddle, and waited.

Two or three hundred yards behind him, still buried in the timber, Bruce Otto was having trouble with Dishpan, a contumacious packmare. Langdon grinned happily as big, good-natured Bruce threatened Dishpan with every known form of torture and punishment, from instant disembowelment to the more merciful end of losing her brain through the medium of a club. One after another the six horses of their outfit appeared out of the timber, and last of all rode the six-foot-two-inch mountain man.

Upon his appearance Langdon dismounted and turned his eyes up the valley. The stubbly blond beard on his face did not conceal the deep tan painted there by weeks of exposure in the mountains. He had opened his shirt at the throat, revealing a neck darkened by sun and wind; his eyes were of a keen, searching blue-grey, and they quested the country ahead of him with the joyous intentness of the hunter and the adventurer.

Langdon was thirty-five. A part of his life he spent in the wild places; the other part he spent in writing about the things he found there. His companion was five years his junior in age, but had the better of him by six inches in height.

Bruce rode up now and unlimbered himself.

‘Did you ever see anything to beat this?’ Langdon asked.

‘Fine country,’ agreed Bruce. ‘Mighty good place to camp too, Jim. There ought to be caribou in this range, an’ bear. We need some fresh meat. Gimme a match, will you?’

It had come to be a habit with them to light both their pipes with one match when possible. They performed this ceremony now while viewing the situation. As Langdon puffed the first luxurious cloud of smoke he nodded towards the timber from which they had just come.

‘Fine place for our tepee,’ he said. ‘Dry wood, running water, and the first good balsam we’ve struck in a week for our beds. We can hobble the horses in that little open plain we crossed a quarter of a

mile back.' He looked at his watch. 'It's only three o'clock. We might go on. But . . . what do you say? Shall we stick for a day or two and see what this country looks like?'

'Looks good to me,' said Bruce. He sat down as he spoke, with his back to a rock, and over his knee he levelled a long brass telescope.

From his saddle Langdon unslung a binocular glass. Together they studied the rolling slopes of the mountains ahead of them.

They were in big-game country, and so far as Langdon and Bruce Otto could discover, no other white man had ever preceded them. It was a country shut in by tremendous ranges. That afternoon they had crossed the summit of the Great Divide that split the skies north and south, and through their glasses they were looking now upon the first green slopes and wonderful peaks of the Firepan Mountains. To the northward—and they had been travelling north—was the Skeena River; on the west and south were the Babine Mountains; eastward was the Driftwood, and still further eastward the Omineca Range and the tributaries of the Finlay. They had started from civilisation on the tenth day of May and this was the thirtieth of June.

For nearly two months they had worked to get beyond the trails of men, and they had succeeded. The valley ahead of them held golden promise. Langdon's heart was filled with deep and satisfying joy. To his friend and comrade, Bruce Otto, with whom he had gone five times into the north country, all mountains and all valleys were very much alike; he had been born among them, he had lived among them all his life, and he would probably die among them.

Bruce gave Langdon a sudden sharp nudge with his elbow. 'I see a grizzly as big as a house,' he announced quietly.

'Where?' Langdon demanded, every nerve in his body aquiver.

'See that slope on the second shoulder, just beyond the ravine over there?' said Bruce, with one eye closed and the other still glued to the telescope. 'He's halfway up, digging out a gopher.'

Langdon focused his glass on the slope, and a moment later an excited gasp came from him. 'Bruce, that's the biggest grizzly in the Rocky Mountains!'

'If he ain't, he's his twin brother,' chuckled the packer. 'An' the wind is in our favour an' he's as busy as a flea!'

In such situations as this, there was a mutual understanding between them that made words unnecessary. They led the eight horses back into the edge of the timber, tied them there, and took their rifles from the leather holsters. Then they both studied the slope and its approaches with their naked eyes.

'We can slip up the ravine,' suggested Langdon.

Bruce nodded. 'I reckon it's a three-hundred-yard shot from there,' he said. 'It's the best we can do. He'd get our wind if we went below 'im.'

They walked openly over the green, flower-carpeted meadows ahead of them. In twenty minutes they came to the ravine, a narrow, rock-littered and precipitous gully worn in the mountainside by centuries of spring floods gushing down from the snowpeaks above. Here they made cautious observations.

The big grizzly was perhaps six hundred yards up the slope and pretty close to three hundred yards from the nearest point reached by the gully.

Bruce spoke in a whisper now. 'You go up an' do the stalkin', Jimmy,' he said. 'That bear's goin' to do one of three things if you miss or only wound 'im: he's goin' to investigate you, or he's goin' up over the break, or he's comin' down in the valley—this way. We can't keep 'im from goin' over the break, an' if he tackles you, just summerset it down the gully. You can beat 'im out. He's most apt to come this way if you don't get 'im, so I'll wait here. Good luck to you, Jimmy!'

With this he went out and crouched behind a rock where he could keep an eye on the grizzly, and Langdon began to climb quietly up the boulder-strewn gully.

## Chapter Two

Thor was, you might say, a bear with individuality. Like some people, he went to bed very early; he began to get sleepy in October, and turned in for his long nap in November. He slept until April, and usually was a week or ten days behind other bears in waking. He was a sound sleeper, and when awake, he was very wide awake. During April and May he permitted himself to doze considerably in the warmth of sunny rocks, but from the beginning of June until the middle of September he closed his eyes in real sleep just about four hours out of every twelve.

Thor was very busy as Langdon began his cautious climb up the gully. He had succeeded in getting his gopher and was now absorbed in finishing off his day's feast with an occasional fat white grub and a few sour ants from under stones that he turned over with his paw.

In his search after these delicacies he used his right paw in turning over the rocks. Ninety-nine out of every hundred bears are left-handed; Thor was right-handed. This gave him an advantage in

fighting, in fishing and in stalking meat, for a grizzly's right arm is longer than his left—so much longer that if he lost his sixth sense of orientation, he would be constantly travelling in a circle.

In his quest Thor was headed for the gully. His huge head hung close to the ground. At short distances his vision was microscopic in its keenness; his olfactory nerves were so sensitive that he could catch one of the big rock ants with his eyes shut.

He would choose the flat rocks mostly. His huge right paw, with its long claws, was as clever as a human hand. The stone lifted, a sniff or two, a lick of his hot, flat tongue, and he ambled on to the next. During the course of a summer he absorbed into his system a good many hundred thousand sour ants, sweet grubs and juicy insects of various kinds, not to mention a host of gophers and still tinier rock rabbits. These small things all added to the huge rolls of fat that kept him alive during his long winter sleep.

Thor did not hear Langdon as the hunter came nearer and nearer up the broken gully. He did not smell him, for the wind was wrong. He had forgotten the noxious smell that had disturbed and irritated him an hour before. He continued his food-seeking, edging still closer to the gully. He was within a hundred and fifty yards of it when a sound suddenly brought him alert. Langdon, in his effort to creep up the steep side of the gully for a shot, had accidentally loosened a rock. It went crashing down the ravine, starting other stones that followed in a noisy clatter. At the foot of the coulée, six hundred yards down, Bruce saw Thor sit up. At that distance he was going to shoot if the bear made for the break.

For thirty seconds Thor sat on his haunches. Then he started for the ravine, ambling slowly and deliberately. Langdon, panting and inwardly cursing at his ill luck, dug his hands and feet fiercely into shale and rock as he struggled to make the last ten feet to the edge of the slope. He heard Bruce yell, but he could not make out the warning.

He was almost at the top when he paused for a moment and looked upwards. His heart went into his throat. For ten seconds he could not move. Directly over him was a monster head and a huge hulk of shoulder. Thor was looking down on him, jaws agape, fangs snarling, eyes burning with a greenish-red fire.

In that moment Thor saw his first man. His great lungs were filled with the hot smell of him, and suddenly he turned away.

With his rifle half under him Langdon had had no opportunity to shoot. Wildly he clambered up the remaining few feet of shale and stones and pulled himself over the top.



Thor was a hundred yards away, speeding in a rolling, ball-like motion towards the break. From the foot of the coulée came the sharp crack of Bruce's rifle. Langdon squatted, raising his left knee for a rest, and at a hundred and fifty yards began firing.

Sometimes it happens that an hour—a minute—changes the destiny of a man, and the ten seconds that followed after the first shot from the foot of the coulée changed Thor. He had got his fill of the man-smell. He had seen man. And now he *felt* him.

It was as if one of the lightning flashes he had often seen splitting the dark skies had descended upon him and had entered his flesh like a red-hot knife. He had turned up the slope when the bullet had struck him in the foreshoulder, tearing a hole through his flesh, but without touching the bone. He was two hundred yards from the ravine when it hit; he was nearer three hundred when the stinging fire seared him again, in his flank.

Neither shot had staggered his huge bulk; twenty such shots would not have killed him. But the second stopped him, and he turned with a roar of rage—a snarling, thunderous cry of wrath that could have been heard a quarter of a mile down the valley.

Bruce heard it as he fired his sixth unavailing shot at seven hundred yards. Langdon was reloading. For fifteen seconds Thor offered himself openly, roaring his defiance, challenging the enemy he could no longer see, and then he continued up over the break. He heard rifle shots, like a new kind of thunder, but he was not hit again. Painfully he began the descent into the next valley.

Once in the descent Thor paused for a few moments, and a pool of blood dripped upon the ground under his foreleg. He sniffed at it suspiciously and wonderingly.

He swung eastwards, and a little later he caught a fresh taint of the man-smell in the air. The wind was bringing it to him. He ambled on a little faster, for he had learned one thing that he would never forget: the man-smell and his hurt had come together.

He reached the bottom and buried himself in the thick timber, and then, crossing the timber, he came to the creek that was the main trail that led from one half of his range to the other.

Instinctively he always took this trail when he was hurt or when he was sick, and also when he was ready to den up for the winter. He had been born in the almost impenetrable fastness at the head of the creek, and his cubhood had been spent amid its brambles of wild currants and soapberries. It was home. In it he was alone. It was the one part of his domain he held inviolate.

He made his way slowly. There was a terrible pain in his

foreshoulder. Now and then it hurt him so that his foreleg doubled up, and he stumbled. Several times he waded shoulder-deep into pools and let the cold water run over his wounds.

Thor's best friend and doctor in such an emergency was the clay wallow on this trail. He reached it as the sun was setting. His jaws hung open; his huge head drooped. He had lost a great deal of blood. He was tired, and his shoulder hurt badly.

Thor waded into the wallow to his armpits. Then he rolled over gently on his wounded side in the soft, golden-coloured clay. It touched his hurt like a cooling salve. It sealed the cut, and Thor gave a great heaving gasp of relief. For a long time he lay in that soft bed of clay. The sun went down, darkness came, and the wonderful stars filled the sky. And still Thor lay there, nursing that first hurt of man.

AT THE EDGE OF THE BALSAM and spruce, Langdon and Bruce sat smoking their pipes after supper, with the glowing embers of a fire at their feet. Bruce chuckled for the fiftieth time.

'Chuckle an' be blasted,' growled Langdon. 'I tell you I hit him, Bruce—twice anyway—and I was at a devilish disadvantage!'

'Specially when 'e was lookin' down an' grinnin' in your face,' retorted Bruce, who had enjoyed hugely his comrade's ill luck. 'Jimmy, at that distance you should a'most ha' killed 'im with a rock!'

'My gun was under me,' explained Langdon.

'Which ain't just the proper place for a gun to be when yo'r hunting a grizzly,' reminded Bruce.

Langdon sat up, knocked the ash out of the bowl of his pipe, and reloaded it with fresh tobacco. 'Bruce, that's the biggest grizzly in the Rocky Mountains! And I'm going to have him for a rug in my den before I finish. I've made up my mind. I'm going to get that grizzly if it takes all summer. Do you think he may clear out?'

Bruce emitted a grunt of disgust. 'Clear out? *Run away?* Mebbe he would if he was a black bear. But he's a grizzly and the boss of this country. He may fight shy of this valley while he's still sore from the bullets, but you can bet he ain't goin' to emigrate. The harder you hit a grizzly, the madder he gets.'

'Do you think we'll be able to trail him in the morning?'

Bruce shook his head. 'It won't be a matter of trailin', he said. 'It's just simply *hunt*. After a grizzly has been hit, he keeps movin'. He won't go out of his range, an' neither is he going to show himself on the open slopes like that up there. Metoosin ought to be along with the dogs inside of three or four days, an' when we get that old Indian and his Airedales in action, there'll be some fun.'

They had made two beds of soft balsam boughs near the fire, and now they began spreading their blankets. 'I have an idea we'll get that bear tomorrow,' Langdon said. It had been a hard day, and within five minutes after stretching himself out, he was asleep.

NEXT MORNING, as the first rose tints of the sun were creeping over the mountaintops, Bruce waded back a quarter of a mile through the heavy dew to round up the horses. When he returned, he brought Dishpan and the two saddle horses. While he saddled them Langdon made the bannock. He had become an expert at what he called 'wild-bread' baking, and his method possessed the double efficiency of saving both waste and time.

He opened one of the heavy flour sacks, made a hollow in the flour with his two doubled fists, partly filled this hollow with a pint of water and half a cupful of caribou grease, added a tablespoonful of baking powder and a three-finger pinch of salt, and began to mix. Within five minutes he had the bannock loaves in the big tin reflector, and half an hour later the sheep steaks were fried, the potatoes done, and the bannock baked golden brown.

The sun was just showing its face in the east when they trailed out of camp. They rode across the valley, but walked up the slope, the horses following obediently in their footsteps.

It was not difficult to pick up Thor's trail. Where he had paused to snarl back defiance at his enemies, there was a big red spatter on the ground; from this point to the summit they followed a crimson thread of blood. They came to the creek, and here, in a strip of firm black sand, Thor's footprints brought them to a pause. Langdon, with an exclamation of amazement, drew out his pocket tape and knelt beside one of the tracks. 'Fifteen and a half inches!' he gasped.

Bruce looked up the gorge. 'The biggest I ever see was fourteen an' a half,' he said, a touch of awe in his voice. 'He was shot up the Athabasca, an' he's stood as the biggest grizzly ever killed in these parts. Jimmy, this one beats 'im!'

They went on. It was ten o'clock when they came to the clay wallow and saw where Thor had made his bed.

'He was pretty sick,' said Bruce in a low voice. 'He was here most all night.'

Moved by the same impulse and the same thought, they looked ahead of them. Half a mile farther on, the mountains closed in and the gorge between them was dark and sunless.

'It's possible he's in there,' Bruce said. 'Mebbe we'd better tie the horses an' go on alone.'

They tied the horses to scrub cedars, and with their rifles in readiness and eyes and ears alert, they went on cautiously into the silence and gloom of the gorge.

## Chapter Three

Thor had gone up the gorge at daybreak. He was stiff when he rose from the clay wallow, but a good deal of the burning and pain had gone from his wound. It still hurt him, but not as it had hurt him the preceding evening. Feverish, he walked up the gorge slowly. With his hot tongue he lapped frequently at the cool water of the creek.

As a cat seeks catnip, so Thor sought certain things when he was not feeling well. He made his way up the gorge, his nose close to the ground, and he sniffed in the low copses and thick bush tangles. He came to a small green spot covered with kinnikinnick, a ground plant that bore red berries as big as a small pea. They were not red now, but green—bitter as gall—and contained an astringent tonic called *uvaursi*. Thor ate them.

After that he found soapberries growing on bushes that looked very much like currant bushes. The fruit was already larger than currants and turning pink. Indians ate these berries when they had fever. Thor gathered half a pint before he went on. They, too, were bitter. He nosed the trees and found at last what he wanted. It was a jack pine, and at several places within his reach the fresh pitch was oozing. A bear seldom passes a bleeding jack pine. It is his chief tonic, and Thor licked the fresh pitch with his tongue. In this way he absorbed not only turpentine, but also, in a roundabout way, a whole pharmacopoeia of medicines made from this particular substance.

By the time he arrived at the end of the gorge, Thor's stomach was a fairly well-stocked drug emporium. Among other things, he had eaten perhaps half a quart of spruce and balsam needles. When a dog is sick, he eats grass; when a bear is sick, he eats pine or balsam needles if he can get them. Also, he pads his stomach and intestines with them in the last hour before denning himself away for the winter.

The sun was not yet up when Thor came to the end of the gorge and stood for a few moments at the mouth of a low cave that reached back into the wall of the mountain. This cave was home. It was not more than four foot high, and twice as wide, but it was many times as deep, with a soft white floor of sand. The far end of it made a comfortable bedroom for a sleeping bear when the temperature was fifty degrees below zero.

Ten years before, Thor's mother had gone in there to sleep through the winter, and when she waddled out to get her first glimpse of spring, three little cubs waddled with her. Thor was one of them. He was still half blind, for it is five weeks after a grizzly cub is born before he can see, and there was not much hair on his body, for a grizzly cub is born as naked as a human baby. His eyes open and his hair begins to grow at just about the same time. Since then Thor had denned nine times in that cavern home. He hesitated at the door to his cave, feeling the wind from down the gorge. Something told him that he should go on.

To the westward there was a sloping ascent up out of the gorge to the summit. Thor climbed this and looked down on the other half of his domain. From range to range this valley was a good two miles in width. Green slopes reached almost to the summits of the mountains; at the foot of the slopes on either side, like decorative fringes, were thin and unbroken lines of forest. Between these two lines of forest lay the open valley of soft and undulating meadow, dotted with its purplish bosks of buffalo willow and mountain sage, its green copses of wild rose and thorn, and its clumps of trees. In the hollow of the valley ran a stream.

Thor descended from where he stood and travelled northwards along the slope, from patch to patch of spruce and balsam, two hundred yards above the fringe of forest. To this height, midway between the meadows in the valley and the first shale and bare rock of the peaks, he came most frequently on his small-game hunts.

Like fat woodchucks, the whistling marmots were beginning to sun themselves on their rocks. Their long, soft, elusive whistlings filled the air with a musical cadence. Now and then one would sound a shrill warning and then flatten himself on his rock as the big bear passed, and for a few moments no whistling would be heard.

But Thor was giving no thought to the hunt this morning. For two hours he travelled steadily northwards along the half-crest of the slopes before he struck down through the timber to the stream. The clay adhering to his wound was beginning to harden, and again he waded shoulder-deep into a pool and stood there for several minutes. The water washed most of the clay away. For another two hours he followed the creek, drinking frequently. His shoulder still hurt him, but his sickness was gone. Thor felt so much better that for the first time he turned and growled back in the direction of his enemies.

Until last night and today he had not known a real hatred. He had fought other bears, but the fighting was not hate. He licked the wounds of a clawed enemy and was quite frequently happy while he



nursed them. But this new thing that was born in him was different. With an unforgettable and ferocious hatred he hated the thing that had hurt him. Without ever having seen or smelled man before, he knew that man was his deadliest enemy. He hated man, and hereafter he would hate everything that bore the man-smell. And with this hate there was also born in him for the first time *fear*.

Thor still followed the creek, nosing along slowly but steadily, his head and neck bent low, his huge rear quarters rising and falling in that rolling motion peculiar to all bears and especially the grizzly. His long claws click-click-clicked on the stones; he crunched heavily in the gravel; in soft sand he left enormous footprints.

That part of the valley that he was now entering held a particular significance for Thor, and he began to loiter. For many mating seasons past he had come to find his Iskwao in this wonderful sweep of meadow and plain between the two ranges. He could always expect her in July, waiting for him or seeking him with that strange, savage longing of motherhood in her breast. She was a splendid golden-brown grizzly who came from the western ranges when the spirit of mating days called. The children of Thor and his Iskwao were the finest young grizzlies in all the mountains. The mother took them back with her unborn, and they opened their eyes and lived and fought in the valleys and on the slopes far to the west. If in later years Thor ever chased his own children out of his hunting grounds or whipped them in a fight, nature blinded him to the fact. He was like most grouchy old bachelors: he did not like small folk. He cuffed cubs soundly whenever they dared to come within reach of him, but always with the flat, soft palm of his paw and with just enough force behind it to send them keeling over and over like little round fluffy balls. When a strange mother bear invaded his range with her cubs, he would not drive them away, and he would not fight with her. Even if he found them eating at one of his kills, he would do nothing more than give the cubs a sound cuffing.

So it was with sudden and violent agitation that Thor caught a certain warm, close smell as he came round a mass of huge boulders. He stopped. Six feet from him, in a patch of white sand, wriggling and shaking for all the world like a half-frightened puppy that had not yet made up its mind whether it had met a friend or an enemy, was a lone bear cub. It was not more than three months old—altogether too young to be away from its mother—and it had a sharp little tan face and a white spot on its baby breast, which marked it as a member of the black bear family and not a grizzly.

With an ominous growl Thor began to look about the rocks for the

mother. She was not in sight, and neither could he smell her. Muskwa—an Indian would have called the cub that—crawled forward on his little belly with a genial wriggling. A low warning rumbled in Thor's chest. It said plainly enough, Don't come any nearer.

Muskwa understood. He lay as if dead, his nose and paws and belly flat on the sand, and Thor looked about him again. When his eyes returned to Muskwa, the cub was within three feet of him, squirming and trembling, licking his lips with his tiny red tongue, half in fear and half pleading for mercy, for Thor had lifted his right paw threateningly.

There was a sort of rattle instead of a growl in Thor's throat. His heavy paw fell to the sand. Again he looked about and sniffed the air; he growled. Any crusty old bachelor would have understood that growl. Now where the devil is the kid's mother! it said.

Something happened then. Muskwa had crept close to Thor's wounded leg. He rose up, and his nose caught the scent of the raw wound. Gently his tongue touched it. It was like velvet, that tongue. It was wonderfully pleasant to feel the cub licking his wound. Thor sniffed the little ball of friendship that had come to him. Muskwa whined in a motherless way. Thor growled, but more softly now. It was no longer a threat. The heat of his great tongue fell once on the cub's face.

Come on! he said, and resumed his journey.

And close at his heels followed the motherless little cub.

AS THOR TRAVELLED UPSTREAM the country became higher and rougher. The slopes were cut by dark, narrow gullies and broken by enormous masses of rocks, jagged cliffs and steep slides of shale. The creek became noisier and more difficult to follow.

Thor was now entering one of his strongholds—a region that contained a thousand hiding places, a wild, upturn country where it was not difficult for him to kill big game and where he was certain that the man-smell would not follow him.

Muskwa was having a hard time of it. His fat little body and his fat little legs were unaccustomed to this sort of journeying, but he was a game youngster and whimpered only once—when he toppled off a rock into the edge of the creek.

At last Thor turned up a deep ravine, which he followed until he came to a plateaulike plain halfway up a broad slope. Here he found a rock on the sunny side of a grassy knoll and, after nosing about restlessly for a few moments, stretched himself out. The utterly

exhausted little tan-faced cub lay down too, so tired that he was sound asleep in minutes.

During the early afternoon Thor had begun to feel hungry. It was not the sort of hunger to be appeased by ants and grubs or even whistling marmots. He was craving red, juicy flesh, and plenty of it. It may be, too, that he guessed how nearly starved little Muskwa was. The cub still lay in a warm pool of sunshine when Thor made up his mind to go on. He rose from beside the rock with a prodigious woof that roused Muskwa. The cub got up, blinked at Thor and then at the sun, and shook himself until he fell down. Thor eyed the black-and-tan mite sourly. How could he hunt down and kill a caribou with that half-starved but very much interested cub at his heels?

Muskwa himself seemed to understand and answer the question. He ran a dozen yards ahead of Thor, then stopped and looked back impudently, his little ears perked forward.

With another woof Thor caught up with Muskwa, and with a sudden sweep of his right paw he sent the cub rolling a dozen feet behind him, a manner of speech that said plainly enough, That's where you belong if you're going hunting with me!

Then Thor lumbered slowly on, eyes and ears and nostrils keyed for the hunt. He travelled in a zigzag fashion, sniffing and investigating. Once, up near the shale, he smelled goat, but he never went above the shale for meat. Lower down his nose touched the trails of porcupines, and often his head hung over the footprints of caribou as he sniffed the air ahead.

Not once in two hours did Thor pay any apparent attention to Muskwa, who was growing hungrier and weaker as the day lengthened. No boy that ever lived was gamer than the little cub. In the rough places he stumbled and fell frequently; he had to fight desperately to make his way up places that Thor could make in a single step; three times Thor waded through the creek and Muskwa half drowned himself in following—but he followed. Sometimes he was close to Thor, and at others he had to run to catch up. The sun was setting when Thor at last found game.

Muskwa did not know why Thor flattened his huge bulk suddenly alongside a rock at the edge of a rough meadow from which they could look down into a small hollow. He wanted to whimper, but he was afraid. And if he had ever wanted his mother at any time in his short life, he wanted her now. He could not understand why she had left him and never come back. This was just about his nursing hour before going to sleep for the night, for he was a March cub and, according to the most approved

mother-bear regulations, should have had milk for another month.

He was what Metoosin, the Indian, would have called *munookow*—that is, he was very soft. Being a bear, his birth had not been like that of other animals. His mother, like all mother bears in a cold country, had brought him into life a long time before she had finished her winter nap in her den. For a month or six weeks after that she had given him milk while she herself neither ate nor drank nor saw the light of day. At the end of those six weeks she had gone forth with him from her den to seek the first mouthful of sustenance for herself. Not more than another six weeks had passed since then, and Muskwa weighed about twenty pounds—that is, he *had* weighed twenty pounds, but he was emptier now and probably weighed a little less.

Three hundred yards below Thor was a clump of balsams, and in that clump there was a caribou—perhaps two or three. Thor knew that as surely as though he saw them. Even Muskwa now caught the scent as he crept up behind the big grizzly and lay down.

For fully ten minutes Thor did not move as his nose gauged the wind. The reason he remained quiet was that he was almost on the danger line. In other words, the mountains and the sudden dip had formed a 'split wind', and had Thor appeared fifty yards above where he now crouched, the keen-scented caribou would have got full wind of him.

With his little ears cocked forward and a new gleam in his eyes, Muskwa now looked upon his first lesson in game-stalking. Thor crouched low, moving slowly and noiselessly on a detour. The huge ruff just forward of his shoulders stood out like the stiffened spine of a dog's back. Muskwa followed. For fully a hundred yards Thor continued cautiously, and three times in that hundred yards he paused to sniff in the direction of the timber. At last he was satisfied. The wind was full in his face, and it was rich with promise.

He began to advance, taking shorter steps now, with every muscle in his great body ready for action. Within two minutes he reached the edge of the balsams, and there he paused again. The crackling of underbrush came distinctly. The caribou were up, but they were not alarmed. They were going forth to graze.

Thor moved quickly to the edge of the timber, and there he stood, concealed by foliage, the meadow in view. A big bull caribou came out first. His horns were half grown. A two-year-old followed, round and sleek and glistening like brown velvet in the sunset. For two minutes the bull stood alert, eyes, ears and nostrils seeking for danger signals; at his heels the younger animal nibbled less suspiciously at the grass. Then, lowering his head until his antlers swept back over his

shoulders, the old bull started slowly forward. The two-year-old followed—and Thor came out softly from his hiding place.

For a single moment Thor seemed to gather himself—and then he started. Fifty feet separated him from the caribou. He had covered half that distance like a huge rolling ball when the animals heard him. They were off like arrows sprung from a bow. But they were too late. It would have taken a swift horse to beat Thor, and he had already gained momentum.

Like the wind, he bore down on the flank of the two-year-old, swung a little to one side, and then without any apparent effort he bounded in and upwards, and the short race was done.

His huge right arm swung over the two-year-old's shoulder, and as they went down his left paw gripped the caribou's muzzle like a huge human hand. Thor fell under, as he always planned to fall. He did not hug his victim to death. Just once he doubled up one of his hind legs, and when it went back, the five knives it carried disembowelled the caribou. Then Thor got up, looked round, and shook himself with a rumbling growl that might have been either a growl of triumph or an invitation for Muskwa to come to the feast.

For an hour the two ate in the slow and satisfied manner of gourmets. Muskwa, flat on his little paunch and almost between Thor's huge forearms, lapped up the blood and snarled like a kitten as he ground tender flesh between his tiny teeth.

The last of the sun faded away from the mountains, and darkness followed swiftly after the twilight. It was dark when they finished, and little Muskwa was as wide as he was long.

Thor was the greatest of nature's conservators. With him nothing went to waste that was good to eat, and at the present moment if the old bull caribou had deliberately walked within his reach, Thor in all probability would not have killed him. He had food, and his business was to store that food where it would be safe. In his huge jaws he caught the caribou by the back of the neck, dragging the carcass towards the balsam thicket.

At the edge of the balsams, Thor found a hollow in the ground. He thrust in the carcass and, while Muskwa watched with growing interest, he covered it with dry needles, sticks, a rotting tree butt and a log. He nosed round for a bit and then went out of the timber. Muskwa followed him. Stars were beginning to fill the sky as Thor struck straight up a rugged slope that led to the mountaintops. They crossed a patch of snow and at last Thor stopped. He was on a narrow ledge, with a perpendicular wall of rock at his back. Under him fell away the chaos of torn-up rock and shale.



Thor lay down, and for the first time since his hurt in the other valley he stretched out his head between his great arms and heaved a deep and restful sigh. Muskwa crept up close to him, so close that he was warmed by Thor's body, and together they slept the deep and peaceful sleep of full stomachs, while over them the moon came up to flood the peaks and the valley in a golden splendour.

## Chapter Four

Langdon and Bruce crossed the summit into the westward valley in the afternoon of the day Thor left the clay wallow. It was two o'clock when Bruce turned back for the three horses, leaving Langdon on a high ridge. For two hours after the packer returned, they followed slowly along the creek above which the grizzly had travelled, and when they camped for the night, they were still two or three miles from the spot where Thor had come upon Muskwa. They had not found his tracks again in the sand of the creek bottom. Yet Bruce was confident. He knew that Thor had been following the crests.

'If you go back out of this country an' write about bears, don't make a fool o' yo'rself like most of the writin' fellows,' Bruce said, as they sat back to smoke their pipes after supper. 'Two years ago I took a natcherlist out for a month, an' he was so tickled he said 'e'd send me a bunch o' books about bears an' wild things. He did! I read 'em. I laughed at first, an' then I got mad. There's a mighty lot of interestin' things to say about bears without making a fool o' yo'rself.'

Langdon nodded. 'What were some of the fool things you read in those books?' he asked.

Bruce blew out a cloud of smoke reflectively. 'I figger most natcherlists go out an' get acquainted with one grizzly, an' then they write up all grizzlies accordin' to that one. That ain't fair to the grizzlies, darned if it is! There wasn't one of them books that didn't say the grizzly wasn't the fiercest, man-eatingest cuss alive. He ain't—unless you corner 'im. Most of 'em are vegetarians, but some of 'em ain't. I've seen grizzlies pull down goat an' sheep an' caribou, an' I've seen other grizzlies feed with them animals an' never make a move toward 'em.'

Langdon said, 'You can make up your mind this big fellow we are after is a game-killer, Bruce.'

'You can't tell,' replied the mountaineer. 'Size don't always tell. I knew a grizzly once that wasn't much bigger'n a dog, an' he was a game-killer. Sometimes it's born in a grizzly to be a killer, an' sometimes

he becomes a killer by chance. If he kills once, he'll kill again.'

'I should think size would have something to do with it,' argued Langdon. 'It seems to me that a bear that eats flesh would be bigger and stronger than if he was a vegetarian.'

'That's one o' the cur'ous things about it,' replied Bruce, with his odd chuckle. 'Why is it a bear gets so fat he can hardly walk along in September when he don't feed on much else but berries an' ants an' grubs? An' why does he grow so fast during the four or five months he's denned up an' dead to the world? Why is it that for a month, an' sometimes two months, the mother gives her cubs milk while she's still what you might call asleep? And why ain't them cubs bigger'n they are? That natcherlist laughed until I thought he'd split when I told him a grizzly bear cub wasn't much bigger'n a house-cat kitten when born!'

For a few moments they both puffed silently on their pipes. Then Langdon said, 'It's simply a result of nature's farsightedness, Bruce. If the cubs weren't about the size of a house-cat's kittens, the mother bear could not sustain them during those weeks when she eats and drinks nothing herself. There seems to be just one flaw in this scheme: an ordinary black bear is only about half as large as a grizzly, yet a black bear cub when born is much larger than a grizzly cub. Now why the devil that should be—'

Bruce interrupted. 'A grizzly dens high, Jimmy, and a black bear dens low. When the snow is four feet deep up where the grizzly dens, the black bear can still feed in the deep valleys an' thick timber. He goes to bed mebbe a week or two weeks later than the grizzly, an' he gets up in the spring a week or two weeks earlier; he's much fatter when he dens up, an' he ain't so poor when he comes out—an' so the mother's got more strength to give to her cubs.'

'I never thought of that.'

Bruce rose to his feet and stretched. 'Fine day tomorrow,' he said, yawning. 'Look how white the snow is on the peaks.'

'Bruce—'

'What?'

'How heavy is this bear we're after?'

'Twelve hundred pounds—mebbe a little more. I didn't have the pleasure of lookin' at him so close as you did, Jimmy. If I had, we'd been dryin' his skin now!'

'And he's in his prime!'

'Between eight and twelve years old, I'd say, by the way he went up the slope. An old bear don't roll so easy.'

'You've run across some pretty old bears, Bruce?'

'So old some of 'em needed crutches,' said Bruce, unlacing his boots. 'I've shot bears so old they'd lost their teeth.'

'How old?'

'Thirty, thirty-five, mebbe forty years. Good night, Jimmy.'

'Good night, Bruce.'

THEY WERE AWAKENED some hours later by a deluge of rain that brought them out of their blankets. They had not put up their tepee. The night was as black as a cavern, except when it was broken by lurid flashes of lightning, and the mountains rolled and rumbled with deep thunder.

'Fine day tomorrow,' Langdon laughed, repeating Bruce's words of a few hours before. 'Look how white the snow is on the peaks.'

Whatever Bruce said was drowned in a crash of thunder.

The storm only lasted five or ten minutes, but an early July rain at three o'clock in the morning in the northern British Columbia mountains is not as warm as it might be, and for the greater part of an hour Langdon and Bruce gathered dry, pitch-filled twigs from under trees for a fire and dried their blankets and clothing. It was a little after six when they started with their two saddle horses and single packhorse up the valley. Bruce had the satisfaction of reminding Langdon that his prediction had come true, for a glorious day followed the thunder shower.

Under them the meadows were dripping. The valley purred with the music of swollen streamlets. From the mountaintops a half of last night's snow was gone, and to Langdon the flowers seemed taller and more beautiful. The air that drifted through the valley was laden with the sweetness and freshness of the morning, and over it all, the sun shone in a warm and golden sea.

They had not gone a quarter of a mile up the creek bottom when Bruce gave a sudden exclamation and stopped. He pointed to a round patch of sand in which Thor had left one of his huge footprints. Langdon dismounted and measured it.

'It's he!' There was a thrill of excitement in his voice. 'Hadn't we better go without the horses, Bruce?'

The mountaineer shook his head. 'He's still in the creek bottom, an' probably three or four miles ahead. We'll ride on a couple o' miles.'

It was easy to follow Thor's course after this, for he had hung close to the creek. At the soft carpet of sand where Thor and Muskwa had become acquainted, the rain had obliterated the cub's tiny footprints, but the sand was cut up by the grizzly's tracks. The packer's teeth gleamed as he looked at Langdon.



'He ain't very far,' Bruce whispered. 'Shouldn't wonder if he spent the night pretty close an' he's mooshing on just ahead of us.'

The hunters hobbled their horses.

Bruce wet a finger and held it above his head to get the wind. 'We'd better get up on the slopes,' he said.

They made their way round a great mass of boulders, holding their guns in readiness. At the mouth of a small coulée that promised an easy ascent, they paused again. In the sand there were the tracks of another bear. Bruce dropped on his knees.

'It's another grizzly,' said Langdon.

'No, it ain't; it's a black,' said Bruce. 'Jimmy, can't I ever knock into yo'r head the difference between a black an' a grizzly track? This is the hind foot, an' the heel is round. If it was a grizzly, it would be pointed. It's a black as plain as the nose on yo'r face.'

'And going our way,' said Langdon. 'Come on.'



Two hundred yards up the coulée, the bear had climbed out onto the slope. Langdon and Bruce followed. In the thick grass and hard shale of the first crest of the slope, the tracks were quickly lost. Langdon's eyes were questing the higher peaks and found something that made him grip his companion's arm. 'Look,' he whispered.

Not more than thirty feet above them was a big rock, and protruding from behind the farther side of this rock was the rear half of a black bear, its glossy coat shining in the sunlight. For a full half-minute Bruce continued to stare in amazement. Then he grinned. 'Asleep—dead asleep! Jimmy—you want to see some fun?' He put down his gun and drew out his long hunting knife. 'If you never saw a bear run, yo'r goin' to see one run now, Jimmy! You stay here.'

He began crawling slowly and quietly up the slope towards the rock. Twice he looked back, grinning broadly. There was undoubtedly going to be a very much astonished bear racing for the



tops of the Rocky Mountains in another moment or two. Finally Bruce reached the rock. The long knife blade shot forward, and a half inch of steel buried itself in the bear's rump. What followed in the next thirty seconds Langdon would never forget. The bear made no movement. Bruce jabbed again. Still there was no movement. Bruce rose slowly to his feet. 'Now what the devil do you think of that?' he said. 'He ain't asleep—he's dead!'

Langdon ran up to him. Bruce still held the knife in his hand, and there was an odd expression on his face—a look that put troubled furrows between his eyes. 'I never see anything like that before,' he said, slowly slipping his knife into its sheath. 'It's a she-bear, an' she had cubs—pretty young cubs too, from the looks o' her.'

'She was after a whistler, and undermined the rock,' added Langdon. 'Crushed to death.'

Bruce was on his knees, examining the dead mother's teats. 'She didn't have more'n two cubs—mebbe one,' he said, rising. 'About three months old.'

'And they'll starve?'

'If there was only one, he probably will. The little cuss had so much milk he didn't have to forage for himself. Cubs is a good deal like babies—you can wean 'em early or you can ha'f grow 'em on pap.'

He turned along the crest of the slope, his eyes searching the valley, and Langdon followed a step behind him, wondering what had become of the cub.

And Muskwa, still slumbering on the rock ledge with Thor, was dreaming of the mother who lay crushed under the rock on the slope, and as he dreamed he whimpered softly.

## Chapter Five

The ledge where Thor and Muskwa lay caught the first gleams of the morning sun, and as the sun rose higher the ledge grew warmer. Thor, when he awoke, merely stretched himself and made no effort to rise. After the feast in the valley he was feeling fine and comfortable. In the chill of the night Muskwa had snuggled up close between the warmth of Thor's huge forearms and still lay there as he dreamed.

After a time Thor did something uncharacteristic—he sniffed gently at the soft little ball between his paws. Just once his big flat red tongue touched the cub's face, and Muskwa, perhaps still dreaming of his mother, snuggled closer.

The big grizzly, despite the firmly established habits of years of

aloneness, was beginning to comprehend that there was something very pleasant and companionable in the nearness of Muskwa. Also it was drawing near to Thor's mating season, and about Muskwa was the scent of his mother. And so as Muskwa continued to bask in the sunshine, there was a growing content in Thor. He sniffed the air, and it was filled with the unpolled sweetness of growing grass, of flowers and balsam, and water fresh from the clouds.

While Thor still lay restfully looking down into the valley, Muskwa lifted his head. He blinked at the sun for a moment, then rubbed his face sleepily with his tiny paw and stood up, ready for another day. He began investigating the crevices in the rock wall and tumbled about among the boulders on the ledge. Thor rose cumbrously and shook himself.

For five minutes he stood, looking down into the valley, sniffing the wind. Muskwa, perking up his little ears, came and stood beside him.

Finally Thor turned along the rock shelf and began descending into the valley. Muskwa tagged behind. The cub felt twice as big and fully twice as strong as yesterday, and he knew they were returning to where they had feasted last night.

They had descended half the distance of the slope when the wind brought something to Thor. A deep-chested growl rolled out of him as he stopped for a moment, the thick ruff about his neck bristling ominously. The scent he had caught came from the direction of his cache. He smelled the presence of another bear, a he-bear, and it drifted strongly up a ravine that ran straight down towards the balsam patch in which he had hidden the caribou.

Growling under his breath, Thor began to descend so swiftly that Muskwa had great difficulty in keeping up with him. Not until they came to the edge of the plain overlooking the balsams did they stop. Suddenly every muscle in Muskwa's small body became rigid.

Seventy-five yards below them, their cache was being outraged. The robber was a huge black bear. He was perhaps three hundred pounds lighter than Thor, but he stood almost as high—the biggest and boldest bear that had entered Thor's domain in many a day. He had pulled the caribou carcass from its hiding place and was eating as Thor and Muskwa looked down on him.

Slowly and very deliberately Thor began picking his way down those last seventy-five yards. He seemed to be in no hurry now.

When he reached the edge of the meadow, perhaps thirty or forty yards from the big invader, he stopped again. The ruff about his shoulders was bigger than Muskwa had seen it before.

The black looked up from his feast, and for a full half-minute they

eyed each other. In a slow, pendulumlike motion the grizzly's huge head swung from side to side; the black was motionless as a sphinx.

Four or five feet from Thor stood Muskwa. He knew that something was going to happen soon, and he was ready to put his stub of a tail between his legs and flee with Thor, or advance and fight with him. His eyes were curiously attracted by that pendulumlike swing of Thor's head. All nature understood that swing. Man had learned to understand it. 'Look out when a grizzly rolls his head!' is the first commandment of the bear-hunter in the mountains.

The big black understood, but he was new in the valley, powerful and unwhipped, and he stood his ground. The first growl of menace that passed between the two came from the black.

Thor advanced slowly and deliberately. Muskwa followed halfway and then stopped and squatted on his belly. Ten feet from the carcass Thor paused again, and now his huge head swung more swiftly back and forth, and a low, rumbling thunder came from between his half-open jaws. The black's ivory fangs snarled. For perhaps thirty seconds they were like two angry men, each trying to strike terror into the other's heart by the steadiness of his look.

What happened after that began so quickly that Muskwa was struck dumb with terror, and he lay flattened on the earth, as motionless as a stone.

With that grinding, snarling grizzly roar, which is unlike any other animal cry in the world, Thor flung himself at the black. The black reared just enough to fling himself backwards easily as they came together breast to breast. He rolled on his back, but Thor was too old a fighter to be caught by that first vicious ripping stroke of the black's hind foot, and he buried his four long flesh-rending teeth to the bone of his enemy's shoulder. At the same time, he struck a terrific cutting stroke with his left paw. The black buried his knifelike claws in Thor's wounded shoulder, and the blood spurted forth afresh.

With a roar that seemed to set the earth trembling, the huge grizzly lunged backwards and reared himself to his full nine feet. He had given the black warning. Now it was a fight to the death. The black had done more than ravage his cache. He had opened the man-wound!

A minute before, Thor had been fighting for law and right—without a serious desire to kill. Now he was terrible. His eyes shone with the glare of red garnets, their greenish-black pupils almost obliterated by the ferocious fire that was in them.

Thor was not a stand-up fighter. For perhaps six or seven seconds he remained erect, but as the black advanced a step he dropped quickly to all fours.

The black met him halfway. Muskwa, hugging close to the earth, watched the battle. It was such a fight as only the jungles and the mountains see, and the roar of it drifted up and down the valley.

The two giant beasts used their powerful forearms while with fangs and hind feet they ripped and tore. For two minutes they were in a close and deadly embrace, both rolling on the ground, now one under and then the other. The black clawed ferociously; Thor used chiefly his teeth and his terrible right hind foot. With his forearms he made no effort to rend the black, but used them to hold and throw his enemy. He was fighting to get *under*, as he had flung himself under the caribou he had disembowelled.

Again and again Thor buried his long fangs in the other's flesh, but in fang fighting, the black was even quicker than he, and Thor's right shoulder was being literally torn to pieces when their jaws met in midair. Muskwa heard the grind of teeth on teeth, the sickening crunch of bone.

Then suddenly the black was flung upon his side as though his neck had been broken, and Thor was at his throat. Still the black fought, his gaping and bleeding jaws powerless now as the grizzly closed his own huge jaws on the jugular.

Muskwa stood up. The thrill of the battle sent the blood hot and fast through his little body. With a faint snarl he darted in. His teeth sank futilely into the thick hair and tough hide of the black's rump. He pulled and he snarled, filled with a blind and unaccountable rage.

The black twisted himself upon his back, and one of his hind feet raked Thor's chest. That stroke would have disembowelled a caribou or a deer; it left a red, open, bleeding wound three foot long on Thor.

Before it could be repeated, the grizzly swung himself sideways, and the second blow caught Muskwa. The flat of the black's foot struck him, and for twenty feet he was sent like a stone out of a slingshot. He was not cut, but he was stunned.

In that same moment Thor released his hold on his enemy's throat and swung to one side. He was dripping blood. The black made an effort to rise, and Thor was on him again.

This time Thor got his deadliest of all holds. His great jaws clamped in a death grip over the upper part of the black's nose. One terrific grinding crunch and the fight was over. But Thor continued to maul and tear for ten minutes after the black was dead.

When Thor finally quit, the scene of battle was terrible to look upon. The ground was torn up and red; it was covered with great strips of black hide and pieces of flesh, and the black, on the underside, was torn open from end to end.



Two miles away, scarcely breathing as they looked through their glasses, Langdon and Bruce had witnessed the spectacle, but they could not see the cub. As Thor stood panting and bleeding over his lifeless enemy, Langdon lowered his glass, and Bruce cried, 'Come on! The black is dead. If we hustle, we can get our grizzly.'

And down in the meadow, Muskwa ran to Thor with a bit of warm black hide in his mouth, and Thor lowered his great bleeding head, and just once his red tongue shot out and caressed Muskwa's face. For the little tan-faced cub had proved himself, and it may be that Thor had seen and understood.

NEITHER THOR NOR MUSKWA went near the caribou meat after the big fight. Thor was in no condition to eat, and Muskwa was so filled with excitement that he could not swallow. He continued to worry a strip of black hide, snarling and growling.

For many minutes the grizzly stood with his big head drooping, and the blood gathered in splashes under him. He was facing down the valley. There was almost no wind—only now and then a breath that barely stirred the tops of the balsams and spruces. And with it, faint and terrible, came the man-smell!

Thor roused himself with a sudden growl. Muskwa sniffed the air. It was warm with the man-scent, for Langdon and Bruce were running and sweating, and the odour of man-sweat drifts heavy and far. It filled Thor with a fresh rage. He snarled menacingly in the face of the wind. He was in no humour to run away. In these moments, if Bruce and Langdon had appeared over the rise, Thor would have charged with deadly ferocity.

But the breath of air passed, and there followed a peaceful calm. The valley was filled with the purr of running water; from their rocks the whistling marmots called forth their soft notes. Finally Thor turned and walked slowly towards the coulée down which he and Muskwa had come a little while before. Muskwa followed.

The wounds Thor had received in the fight, unlike bullet wounds, had stopped bleeding after the first few minutes, and he left no telltale red spots behind. They stopped and drank at a pool formed by the melting snow on the peaks, and then went on. Thor did not stop when they reached the ledge on which they had slept the previous night. And this time Muskwa was not tired when they reached the ledge. He was becoming hardened under Thor's strenuous tutelage.

It was evident that Thor knew where he was going. His trail led directly to a great crevice, hardly wider than his body, and going through this, he emerged at the edge of the wildest and roughest slide



of rock that Muskwa had ever seen. It looked like a huge quarry and reached almost to the top of the mountain above.

For Muskwa to make his way over that chaotic upheaval was an impossibility, and as Thor began to climb over the first rocks the cub stopped and whined. When Thor paid no attention, terror seized him and he cried out as loudly as he could while he hunted frantically for a path up through the rocks. Then, thirty yards away, Thor stopped, faced about deliberately, and waited.

This gave Muskwa courage, and he scratched and clawed and even used his chin and teeth in his efforts to follow. When he reached Thor, all at once his terror vanished. For Thor stood on a white, narrow path that was as solid as a floor, perhaps eighteen inches wide. It looked as though an army of workmen with hammers had broken up tons of sandstone and slate and then filled in between the boulders with rubble, making a smooth and narrow road. But instead of hammers, the hoofs of a hundred generations of mountain sheep had made the trail. The first band of bighorn may have blazed the way before Columbus discovered America; surely it had taken a great many years for hoofs to make that smooth road among the rocks.

As Thor stood waiting for Muskwa to get his wind they both heard an odd chuckling sound approaching them from above. Then out from behind a boulder came a big porcupine.

Throughout the North the porcupine is known as the 'lost man's friend', for the wandering and starving prospector or hunter can nearly always find a porcupine, if nothing else; and a child can kill him. He is the happiest, the best-natured, and altogether the mildest-mannered beast that ever drew breath. He chatters and chuckles incessantly, and when he travels, he walks like a huge animated pincushion; he is oblivious of everything about him, as though asleep.

This particular porky advancing upon Muskwa and Thor was enormously fat, and as he waddled slowly along, chuckling happily to himself, his eyes were on the path at his feet. He was within five feet of Thor before he saw the grizzly. Then, in a wink, he humped himself into a ball. For a few seconds he scolded vociferously. After that he was silent, his little red eyes watching the big bear.

Thor did not want to kill him, but the path was narrow and he was ready to go on. He advanced a foot or two. Porky turned his back to Thor and made ready to deliver a swipe with his powerful tail. In that tail were several hundred quills. Thor hesitated, then advanced another foot. With a sudden *chuck-chuck-chuck*—the most vicious sound he was capable of making—Porky approached backwards, and his broad, thick tail whipped through the air with a force that would

have driven quills a quarter of an inch into the butt of a tree. Having missed, he humped himself again, and Thor stepped out on the boulder and circled round him.

Porky unlimbered himself; his quills settled a bit; he now advanced towards Muskwa, at the same time resuming his good-natured chuckling. Instinctively the cub hugged the edge of the path and, in doing so, slipped over the edge. By the time he had scrambled up again, Porky was four or five feet beyond him, totally absorbed in his quest for new feeding grounds, talking and singing to himself.

For nearly a mile Thor and Muskwa followed the winding course of the Bighorn Highway to the very top of the range. Up here the wind whipped Muskwa with an unpleasant chill. Twice a great bird swooped near him—an eagle. The second time, it came so near that he heard the beat of it and saw its great head and lowering talons.

Thor whirled towards the eagle and growled. If Muskwa had been alone, the cub would have gone sailing off in those murderous talons. As it was, the third time the eagle circled, it was down the slope from them and after other game. The scent of the game came to Thor and Muskwa, and they stopped. A hundred yards below them was a slide of soft shale, and on this shale, basking in the warm sun, was a band of twenty or thirty sheep, mostly ewes and their lambs. Three huge old rams were lying on a patch of snow further to the east.

With his six-foot wings spread out like twin fans, the eagle continued to circle, as silent as a feather floating on the wind. The ewes and even the old bighorn were unconscious of his presence. Most of the lambs were lying close to their mothers, but three of a livelier turn of mind were hopping about in playful frolic.

The eagle's fierce eyes were upon these youngsters. He drifted further away—a full rifle-shot distance straight in the face of the wind; then he swung gracefully and came back with the wind. His wings apparently motionless, he gathered speed, then shot straight for the lambs. He seemed to have come and gone like a great shadow, and just one plaintive, agonised bleat marked his passing—and two little lambs were left where there had been three.

Thor led Muskwa on. After a time the Bighorn Highway began to descend into a valley. Another hour of travel and the bare shale and grey crags were above them, and they were on the green slopes.

It was evident that Thor had something on his mind. With his head hunched low he travelled steadily northwards, and a compass could not have marked out a straighter line for the lower waters of the Skeena. He was tremendously businesslike, and Muskwa, tagging bravely along behind, wondered if he was never going to stop.

THE HUNTERS ARRIVED BREATHLESS upon the scene of the sanguinary conflict between Thor and the giant black. Bruce was certain that Thor had gone up the mountain.

Bruce left Langdon to meditate on the field of battle, while he began trailing Thor. Langdon made notes for a steady hour. Meanwhile, the mountaineer made his way up the coulée. Thor had left no blood, but where others would have seen nothing, Bruce detected the signs of his passing. When he returned to where Langdon was completing his notes, his face wore a look of satisfaction.

'He went over the mount'in,' Bruce said briefly.

They climbed over the volcanic quarry of rock and followed the Bighorn Highway to the point where Thor and Muskwa had watched the eagle and the sheep. They scanned the valley through their glasses. Bruce was silent for a long time; then he lowered his telescope and turned to Langdon. 'I guess I've got his range pretty well figured out,' he said. 'He runs these two valleys, an' we've got our camp too far south. See that timber down there? That's where our camp should be. What do you say to moving up here?'

'And leave our grizzly until tomorrow?'

Bruce nodded.

Suddenly Langdon grew rigid. 'What was that?'

'I didn't hear anything,' said Bruce.

For a moment they stood side by side, listening.

'Hear it,' whispered Langdon, and his voice was filled with sudden excitement.

'The dogs!' cried Bruce.

'Yes, the dogs.'

Faintly there came to them the distant, thrilling tongue of the Airedales. The Indian, Metoosin, had come, and he was seeking them in the valley.

## Chapter Six

By the time Langdon and Bruce had reached the summit of the Bighorn Highway and were listening to the distant tonguing of the dogs, little Muskwa was in abject despair. Following Thor had been like a game of tag with never a moment's rest.

An hour after they left the sheep trail, they came to the rise in the valley where the waters separated. From this point they descended very quickly into a much lower country, and for the first time Muskwa encountered marshland and travelled at times through grass

so rank and thick that he could not see but could only hear Thor forging on ahead of him.

The stream they were following grew wider and deeper, and in places they skirted the edges of dark, quiet pools. They were fully seven miles north of Bruce and Langdon when they came to a lake. To Muskwa it was dark and unfriendly-looking. The forest grew close down to its shore. In places it was almost black. Queer birds squawked in the thick reeds. It was heavy with a strange fragrance that made the cub lick his chops and filled him with hunger.

For a minute or two Thor stood sniffing this scent that filled the air. It was the smell of fish. Slowly the big grizzly began picking his way along the edge of the lake to the mouth of a small creek. It was not more than twenty foot wide, but it was dark and quiet and deep, like the lake itself. For a hundred yards Thor made his way up this creek, until he came to where a number of trees had fallen across it, forming a jam. Close to this jam the water was covered with a green scum. Very quietly he crept out on the logs.

Midway in the stream he paused and with his right paw gently brushed back the scum so that an open pool of clear water lay directly under him. Muskwa's bright little eyes watched him from the shore.

Thor stretched himself out on his belly, his head and right paw well over the pool. He put his paw a foot into the water and held it there very quietly. He could see clearly to the bottom of the stream.

Patiently he waited, and very soon this patience was rewarded. A beautiful spotted trout floated out from under the scum, and so suddenly that Muskwa gave a yelp of terror, Thor's huge paw sent a shower of water a dozen feet into the air, and the fish landed with a thump within three feet of the cub. Instantly Muskwa was upon it. His sharp teeth dug into it as it flopped and struggled.

Thor rose on the logs, but when he saw that Muskwa had taken possession of the fish, he resumed his former position. Muskwa was just finishing his first real kill when a second spout of water shot upwards and another trout pirouetted shorewards through the air. This time Thor followed quickly, for he was hungry.

It was a glorious feast they had that early afternoon beside the shaded creek. Five times Thor knocked fish out from under the scum, but Muskwa could not eat more than his first trout.

For several hours after their dinner they lay in a cool, hidden spot close to the log jam. It was not only his hunger for fish or fear of his enemies that was bringing Thor into the lower country of the Babine waterways. For a week past he had been filled with a strange and unsatisfied yearning, and as Muskwa napped in his little bed among



the bushes Thor's ears were keenly alert for certain sounds and his nose frequently sniffed the air. He wanted a mate.

It was *puskoowepesim*—the moulting moon—and always in this moon he hunted for the female that came to him from the western ranges. He was almost entirely a creature of habit, and always he made this particular detour. He never failed to feed on fish along the way, and the more fish he ate, the stronger was the odour of him. This perfume of golden-spotted trout may have made him more attractive to his ladylove. Anyway, he ate fish, and he smelled abundantly.

Thor rose and stretched himself two hours before sunset, and he knocked three more fish out of the water. Muskwa ate the head of one, and Thor finished the rest. Then they continued their pilgrimage.

It was a new world that Muskwa entered now. There were no whistling marmots and no fat little gophers running about. The water of the lake lay still and dark and deep. There were no rocks to climb over, but dank, soft logs, thick windfalls and litters of brush. The air was different too. It was very still. Under their feet at times was a wonderful carpet of soft moss. And the forest was filled with a strange gloom and mysterious shadows. Thor did not travel so swiftly here. He stepped quietly; frequently he stopped and cautiously looked about him; he smelled at the edges of pools hidden under the roots.

Muskwa by now had had more than enough of travel. To keep up with Thor's ambling gait, he was compelled to trot. The bottoms of his feet were like boils; his tender nose was raw from contact with the knife-edged marsh grass. Still, he hung on desperately until the creek bottom was again sand and gravel and travelling was easier.

The stars were up now, millions of them, clear and brilliant, and it was quite evident that Thor had set his mind on an all-night hike—a *kuppatipsk pimootao*, as a Cree tracker would have called it. Just how it would have ended for Muskwa, had not the spirits of thunder and rain and lightning put their heads together to give him a rest, is a matter of conjecture.

For perhaps an hour the stars were undimmed, and Thor kept on, while Muskwa limped on all four feet. Then a low rumbling gathered in the west. It approached swiftly. Thor grew uneasy and sniffed in the face of it. The stars began to go out. A moaning wind came. And then the rain. Thor had found a huge rock that shelved inwards, like a lean-to, and he crept back under this with Muskwa before the deluge descended. The lightning and the crash of thunder terrified Muskwa. Now he could see Thor in great blinding flashes of fire, and the next instant it was as black as pitch; the tops of the mountains seemed to be falling down into the valley. He snuggled closer and closer to Thor,



until at last he lay between his two forearms, half buried in the long hair of the big grizzly's shaggy chest. Thor himself was not much concerned with these noisy convulsions of nature.

It stopped raining soon after midnight, but it was very dark, the stream was flooding over its bars, and Thor remained under the rock. Muskwa had a splendid sleep.

Day had come when Thor, trailed by Muskwa, began to follow the creek again. At last, early in the afternoon, he came to a pool that he could not pass. It was not a dozen feet in width, and it was alive with trout that had waited too long after the flood season to descend into deeper waters. At one end the pool was two foot deep; at the other end, only a few inches. The grizzly waded openly into the deepest part, and from the bank above, Muskwa saw the shimmering trout darting into the shallower water. Thor advanced slowly, and now, when he stood in less than eight inches of water, the panic-stricken fish tried to escape back into the deeper part of the pool.

Again and again Thor's big right paw swept up great showers of water. With the first inundation came a two-pound trout, which Muskwa quickly dragged out of range and began eating. So agitated became the pool because of the mighty strokes of Thor's paw that the trout completely lost their heads, and no sooner did they reach one end than they turned about and darted for the other. They kept this up until the grizzly had thrown fully a dozen of their number ashore.

So absorbed was Muskwa in his fish, and Thor in his fishing, that neither had noticed a visitor. Both saw him at about the same time, and for fully thirty seconds they stood and stared. The visitor was another grizzly, and as coolly as though he had done the fishing himself, he began eating the fish that Thor had thrown out. Even Muskwa sensed that this was a deadly challenge. The cub looked expectantly at Thor. There was going to be another fight, and he licked his chops in anticipation.

Thor came up out of the pool slowly. On the bank he paused. The grizzlies gazed at each other. Neither growled. Muskwa perceived no signs of enmity, and then to his increased astonishment Thor began eating a fish within three feet of the interloper.

Perhaps man is the finest of all God's creations, but when it comes to his respect for old age, he is no better than, and sometimes not as good as, a grizzly bear. For Thor would not fight an old bear, and he would not drive an old bear from his own meat—which is more than can be said of some humans. And the visitor was an old bear, a sick bear, too old to fish for himself, too old to hunt. The Indians have a name for him: Kuyas Wapusk—the bear so old he is about to die.



They let him go unharmed; other bears tolerate him and let him eat their meat if he chances along; the white man kills him.

This old bear was famished. His claws were gone, and he had barely more than red, hard gums to chew with. If he lived until autumn, he would den up—for the last time. Perhaps death would come even sooner than that. If so, Kuyas Wapusk would know in time, and he would crawl off into some hidden cave to breathe his last. For in all the Rocky Mountains there was not a man who had found the bones or body of a grizzly that had died a natural death.

So Thor let Kuyas Wapusk eat until the last fish was gone, and then went on, with Muskwa tagging at his heels.

THOR AND MUSKWA had travelled a good twenty miles since leaving the Bighorn Highway, and to the little tan-faced cub those twenty miles were like a journey around the world. Ordinarily he would not have gone that far from his birthplace until his second or third year.

Thor had picked out the easiest trails along the creek. Then they went up a long green slide to the smooth, plainlike floor of a break. It took them without much more effort out on the slopes of the other valley, in which Thor had killed the black bear.

From the moment Thor stood looking down into the valley, a change took possession of him. He descended slowly, and when he reached the green meadows and the creek bottom, he mooshed along straight in the face of the wind. It did not bring him the scent he wanted—the smell of his mate. Yet this was where he had always started to hunt for her, and sooner or later he had found her.

When Thor was lovesick, he was tireless. The importance of all other things dwindled into nothingness. It was quite natural that in these exciting hours he should forget Muskwa almost entirely. At least ten times before sunset he crossed and recrossed the creek, and the almost-ready-to-quit cub waded and swam and floundered after him until he was nearly drowned.

JUST AS THE SUN was setting, the unexpected happened. What little wind there was suddenly brought a scent from the western slopes that held Thor motionless in his tracks, then set him off on an ambling, ungainly run. Muskwa rolled after him for half a mile, pegging away for dear life but losing ground. Thor stopped near the bottom of the first slope to take fresh reckonings. When he started up the slope, Muskwa set after him again.

Two or three hundred yards up the mountainside, questing the air as Thor had done, was the beautiful she-grizzly from over the range.

With her was one of her last year's cubs. Thor stopped.

He looked at her. And Iskwa—the female—looked at him.

Then followed true bear courtship. All eagerness, all desire for his mate seemed to have left Thor, and if Iskwa had been eager and yearning, she was profoundly indifferent now. Thor pulled up a bunch of grass and swallowed it. Iskwa moved a step or two, and Thor moved a step or two, and as if purely by accident, their steps were towards each other.

Muskwa was puzzled. The older cub was puzzled. They sat on their haunches like two dogs, one three times as big as the other, and wondered what was going to happen.

It took Thor and Iskwa five minutes to arrive within five feet of each other, and then very decorously they smelled noses.

The year-old cub joined the family circle. The Indians called him Pipoonaskoos—the yearling. He came boldly up to Thor and his mother. For a moment Thor did not seem to notice him. Then his long right arm shot out in a sudden swinging uppercut that lifted Pipoonaskoos clean off the ground and sent him spinning two-thirds of the distance up to Muskwa.

The mother paid no attention to this elimination of her offspring, and still lovingly smelled noses with Thor. Muskwa, however, thought this was the preliminary of another tremendous fight, and with a yelp of defiance he darted down the slope and set upon Pipoonaskoos with all his might.

Pipoonaskoos was 'mother's boy'. That is, he was one of those cubs who persist in following their mothers through a second season instead of striking out for themselves. Muskwa landed on him like a shot out of a gun. Still dazed by the blow of Thor's paw, Pipoonaskoos gave a yelping call to his mother for help at this sudden onslaught. He had never been in a fight, and he rolled over on his back and side, kicking and scratching and yelping as Muskwa's needlelike teeth sank into his tender hide.

By sheer force of superior weight Pipoonaskoos shook Muskwa off and took to flight on a dead run. Muskwa pegged valiantly after him. Pipoonaskoos, turning an affrighted glance sideways, hit against a rock and went sprawling. In another moment Muskwa was at him again, biting and snarling, until he happened to see Thor and Iskwa disappearing over the edge of the slope towards the valley.

Muskwa looked at Pipoonaskoos, and Pipoonaskoos looked at Muskwa. Then with a whimpering yelp the older cub set off after his mother, and Muskwa followed Thor.

All that night Thor and Iskwa kept by themselves in the buffalo

willow thickets and the balsams of the creek bottom. Early in the evening Pipoonaskoos sneaked up to his mother again, and Thor lifted him into the middle of the creek. This proof of Thor's displeasure impressed upon Muskwa the fact that the older bears were not in a mood to tolerate the companionship of cubs, and the result was a wary truce between him and Pipoonaskoos.

All the next day Thor and Iskwaio kept to themselves. However, late in the afternoon as the older bears were lying side by side in a thicket, Thor, without any apparent reason, emitted a growling roar that sounded very much like the sound he had made when tearing the life out of the big black. Iskwaio raised her head and joined him in the tumult. The bloodcurdling mating duet lasted for about a minute, and during this particular minute Muskwa, who lay outside the thicket, thought that surely the hour had come when Thor was beating up the parent of Pipoonaskoos, giving him the cue he was waiting for.

He shot at Pipoonaskoos in a black streak and bowled him over. For several minutes they bit and dug and clawed, until finally the larger cub got away and again took to flight.

At this juncture Thor emerged from the thicket. He was alone. For the first time since last night he seemed to notice Muskwa. He sniffed the wind up the valley and down the valley, then turned and walked straight towards the distant slopes down which they had come the preceding afternoon. Muskwa again followed close at his heels.

So ended Thor's lovemaking and Muskwa's first fighting, and together they trailed eastwards again, to face the most terrible peril that had ever come into the mountains for four-footed beast—a peril that was merciless, a peril from which there was no escape, a peril that was fraught with death.

## Chapter Seven

The first night after leaving Iskwaio and Pipoonaskoos, the big grizzly and the tan-faced cub wandered without sleep under the brilliant stars. Thor did not hunt for meat. He climbed a steep slope, then went down the shale side of a dip, and in a small basin hidden at the foot of a mountain came to a soft green meadow where the dogtooth violet, with its two lilylike leaves, its single cluster of five-petalled flowers, and its luscious, bulbous root, grew in great profusion. And here all through the night he dug and ate.

Muskwa, who was not hungry, wandered about; he found a plashet



of soft mud, which was a great solace to his sore feet. Twenty times during the night he waded in the mud.

The moon came up at about ten o'clock. It rolled over the peaks and filled all the Rocky Mountains with a wonderful glow. The little lake at the foot of the mountain glimmered softly, and the tiny stream that fed it from the melting snows a thousand feet above shot down in glistening cascades, like rivulets of dull, polished diamonds.

When the dawn came, Thor seemed to be in no great haste to leave. This did not displease Muskwa, who made his breakfast of the dogtooth violet bulbs. The sun was well up, and the basin was like a warm oven to a thick-coated bear, when Thor, searching among the rocks near the waterfall, found a miniature cavern. The slate and sandstone were dark and clammy from a hundred little trickles of snow water that ran down from the peaks.

It was just the sort of cool place Thor loved on a July day, but to Muskwa it was gloomy, and after an hour or two he left Thor and began to investigate the treacherous ledges.

For a few minutes all went well; then he stepped on a green-tinted slope of slate worn smooth by the water that had been running over it. It was slippery, and Muskwa's feet went out from under him. The next moment he was on his way to the lake a hundred feet below. He rolled over and over, gathering speed with every yard he made. He let out half a dozen terrified yelps, and these roused Thor.

Where the water from the peaks fell into the lake, there was a drop of ten feet, and over this Muskwa shot with a momentum that carried him far out into the pond. He hit with a big splash and disappeared. Down he went, where everything was black and cold and suffocating. The life preserver with which nature had endowed him in the form of his fat brought him to the surface. He began to paddle with all four feet. It was his first swim, and when he finally dragged himself ashore, he was limp and exhausted.

While he still lay panting and very much frightened, Thor came down from the rocks. He smelled the cub, saw that he was all right, and began to dig up a dogtooth violet. Suddenly he stopped and stood like a statue. Muskwa jumped up and shook himself. Then he listened. A sound came to both of them. The grizzly faced the north, his ears thrust forwards, the sensitive muscles of his nostrils twitching. He could smell nothing, but he *heard*!

Over the slopes that they had climbed, there had come to him faintly a sound that was new to him, that had never before been a part of his life. It was the barking of dogs.

Thor sat on his haunches without moving a muscle. Then quickly

he swung down on all fours and made for the green slope to the southward. Muskwa hurried after.

A hundred yards up the slope, Thor stopped and turned. Again he reared himself. Now Muskwa also faced to the north. A sudden drift of the wind brought the barking of the dogs to them clearly.

Less than half a mile away, Langdon's pack of trained Airedales were hot on the scent. Their baying was filled with the fierce excitement that told Bruce and Langdon, a quarter of a mile behind them, that they were close upon their prey.

Instinct told Thor that a new enemy had come into his world. He was not afraid, but that instinct urged him to retreat. He went higher until he came to a part of the mountain that was rough and broken, where once more he halted.

This time he waited. He could hear the menace drawing nearer. As Thor looked, the leader of the pack came up over the crest of the slope and stood for a moment outlined against the sky. The others followed quickly, and for perhaps thirty seconds they stood on the cap of the hill, looking down into the basin and sniffing the heavy scent with which it was filled.

Thor watched his enemies without moving, while deep in his chest there gathered a low and terrible growl. Not until the pack swept down into the cup of the mountain, giving full tongue again, did he continue his retreat. But it was not flight. He was not afraid. He was going on because he was not seeking trouble. He was not a lover of fighting. But he was ready to fight.

He followed a ledge, with Muskwa slinking close at his heels; he climbed over a huge scarp of rock and twisted among boulders half as big as houses. But not once did he go where Muskwa could not easily follow.

The baying of the dogs was now deep down in the basin. Then it began to rise swiftly, and Thor knew that the pack was coming up the green slide. He stopped again, and this time the wind brought their scent to him full and strong. With the dogs came also the man-smell!

He travelled upwards a little faster now, and the fierce and joyous yelping of the dogs seemed scarcely a hundred yards away when he entered a small open space in the wild upheaval of rock. On the mountainside a wall rose perpendicularly. On the other side was a sheer fall of a hundred feet, and the way ahead was closed, with the exception of a trail scarcely wider than Thor's body, by a huge crag of rock that had fallen from the shoulder of the mountain. The big grizzly led Muskwa close up to this crag and the break that opened through it, and then turned suddenly back, so that Muskwa was

behind him. He fronted the danger that was coming and reared himself up on his hindquarters.

Twenty feet away, the trail he had followed swung sharply round a projecting bulge in the perpendicular wall, and with eyes that were now red and terrible, Thor watched the trap he had set.

The pack was coming full tongue, running shoulder to shoulder. The first of them rushed into the arena that Thor had chosen. The bulk of the horde followed so closely that the first dogs were flung under him as they strove frantically to stop themselves in time.

With a roar Thor launched himself among them. His great right arm swept out and inwards, and with a single crunch of his jaws he broke the back of the foremost hunter. From a second he tore the head so that the windpipe trailed out like a red rope.

He rolled himself forward, and before the remaining dogs could recover from their panic, he had caught one a blow that sent him flying over the edge of the precipice.

Thor backed slowly towards the huge rock beside which Muskwa was crouching, and as he retreated, the dogs advanced.

Their increased barking and Thor's evident inability to drive them away or tear them to pieces terrified Muskwa. Suddenly he turned tail and darted into a crevice in the rock behind him.

Thor continued back until his great hips touched the stone. Then he swung his head sideways and looked for the cub. Not a hair of Muskwa was to be seen. Twice Thor turned his head. After that, seeing that Muskwa was gone, he continued to retreat until he blocked the narrow passage that was his back door to safety.

The dogs were now barking like mad. Nearer and nearer they came, until, without so much as a snarl of warning, Thor darted out upon his enemies with a suddenness that sent them flying wildly for their lives.

Thor did not stop. He kept on. Where the rock wall bulged out, the trail narrowed to five feet. He caught the last dog and drove it down under his paw. As it was torn to pieces the Airedale emitted piercing cries that reached Bruce and Langdon as they hurried up the slide that led from the basin.

Thor rose to his feet and looked again for Muskwa. But the cub was curled up in a shivering ball two feet inside the crevice. It may be that Thor thought he had gone on up the mountain, for he lost no time now in retreating. He had caught the wind again. Bruce and Langdon were sweating, and their smell came to him strongly. He paid no attention to the eight dogs yapping at his heels. As he continued in his retreat the Airedales became bolder, until finally one of them sprang

ahead of the rest and buried his fangs in the grizzly's leg.

This accomplished what barking had failed to do. With another roar Thor turned and pursued the pack headlong for fifty yards over the back trail before he continued upwards towards the shoulder of the mountain.

Had the wind been in another direction, the pack would have triumphed, but each time that Langdon and Bruce gained ground, the wind warned Thor by bringing their odour to him. And the grizzly was careful to keep that wind from the right quarter. As long as he held the wind, he was safe.

It took him half an hour to reach the topmost ridge of rock. From that point he would have to break cover and reveal himself as he made the last two or three hundred yards up the shale side of the mountain to the backbone of the range.

When Thor made this break, he put on a sudden spurt of speed that left the dogs thirty or forty yards behind him. For two or three minutes he was clearly outlined on the face of the mountain, and during the last minute he was splendidly profiled against a carpet of pure-white snow.

Bruce and Langdon saw him at five hundred yards and began firing. Close over his head Thor heard the curious ripping wail of the first bullet, and an instant later came the crack of the rifle.

A second shot sent up a spurt of snow five yards ahead of him. He swung sharply to the right. This put him broadside to the marksmen. Thor heard a third shot—and that was all.

While the reports were still echoing among the crags and peaks, something struck Thor a terrific blow on the flat of his skull, five inches behind his right ear. He went down like a log.

It was a glancing shot. It scarcely drew blood, but for a moment it stunned the grizzly. Before he could rise from where he had fallen, the dogs were upon him, tearing at his throat and body. With a roar Thor sprang to his feet and shook them off. He struck out savagely, and Langdon and Bruce could hear his bellowing as they stood with fingers on the triggers of their rifles, waiting for the dogs to draw away far enough to give them the final shots.

Yard by yard Thor worked his way upwards, snarling at the frantic pack, defying the man-smell, the strange thunder, the burning lighthing—and five hundred yards below, Langdon cursed despairingly as the dogs hung so close he could not fire.

Up to the very skyline the bloodthirsting pack shielded Thor. He disappeared over the summit. The dogs followed. And after that their baying came fainter and fainter.

## Chapter Eight

In his hiding place in the rock, Muskwa heard the last sounds of the battle on the ledge. He was filled with a deadly terror. He could still hear the tonguing of the dogs when other, nearer sounds alarmed him. Langdon and Bruce came rushing round the bulge in the mountain wall, and at the sight of the dead dogs they stopped. Langdon cried out in horror. He was not more than twenty feet from Muskwa. For the first time the cub heard human voices; he saw his first man. A moment later the men were gone.

For a long time Muskwa did not move. Another fear was growing in him now –the fear of losing Thor. He pricked up his ears and whimpered softly. Inch by inch he crawled out of his hiding place and looked about him. For a few moments he stood undecided. He knew Thor had gone up the mountain. He did not need eyes to follow the trail. It was warm under his nose, and he started the zigzag ascent of the mountain as fast as he could go.

It took him a good hour to reach the naked shale that was below the belt of snow and the skyline. Up there he believed he would find Thor. But he was afraid, and he continued to whimper softly to himself as he dug his little claws bravely into the shale.

Muskwa did not look up to the crest of the peak again after he had started. And so, when he was halfway to the top, he did not see Langdon and Bruce as they came over the skyline, and he could not smell them, for the wind was blowing up instead of down. Oblivious to their presence, he came to the snowbelt. Joyously he smelt Thor's huge footprints and followed them. And above him, Bruce and Langdon waited, crouched low, their guns on the ground, each with his thick flannel shirt stripped off and held ready in his hands. When Muskwa was less than twenty yards from them, they came tearing down upon him like an avalanche.

As Bruce flung himself forward, his shirt outspread like a net, Muskwa darted to one side. Bruce sprawled on his face.

Muskwa bolted down the mountain as fast as his short legs could carry him. In another second Bruce was after him again, and Langdon joined in. Langdon flung himself down, shirt outspread, just as the cub made a turn. Unfortunately for Muskwa, his second turn brought him straight to Bruce, and he was enveloped in darkness and there rang out a fiendish and triumphant yell. 'I got 'im!'

Inside the shirt, Muskwa scratched and bit and snarled. Langdon ran down with the second shirt, and very shortly Muskwa was trussed



up like a papoose. His head was the only part of him that showed.

'A couple of husky hunters we are,' said Langdon. 'Come out for a grizzly and end up with that!'

He looked at the cub. Muskwa was eyeing him so earnestly that Langdon stretched out a hand. Muskwa's tiny ears were perked forward. His bright eyes were like glass.

'Cubby won't bite . . . no . . . no . . . nice little cubby—'

The next instant a wild yell startled the mountaintops as Muskwa's needlelike teeth sank into one of Langdon's fingers.

Bruce howled with laughter, and Langdon laughed with him. 'He's a game sport,' Langdon said. 'We'll call him Spitfire. I'm going to take him home with me.' He was silent for a moment, and then said, 'I can't understand it, Bruce. The dogs have cornered fifty bears for us, and until today we've never lost one.'

Bruce looped a buckskin thong about Muskwa's middle, making of it a sort of handle by which he could carry the cub. Muskwa dangled at the end of the string.

'We've run up against a killer,' he said. 'The old fellow's got our wind, an' you can bet he knows what knocked him down up there on the snow. He's hikin'—an' hikin' fast. When we see 'im ag'in, it'll be twenty miles from here.'

Langdon went up for the guns. When he returned, Bruce led the way down the mountain, carrying Muskwa by the buckskin thong. They paused on the bloodstained ledge of rock where Thor had wreaked his vengeance upon his tormentors. Langdon bent over the dog the grizzly had decapitated.

'This is Biscuits,' he said. 'And we always thought she was the one coward of the bunch. The other is Tober; old Fritz is up on the summit.'

Bruce was looking over the ledge. He pointed downwards. 'There's another—pitched clean off the face o' the mount'in!' He gasped. 'Jimmy, that's four!'

Langdon's fists were clenched tightly as he stared over the edge of the precipice. 'Wild horses can't tear me away from these mountains now. I'll stick until winter if I have to. I swear I'm going to kill him—if he doesn't run away.'

'He won't do that,' said Bruce tersely as he once more swung down the trail with Muskwa.

It was almost dark when they approached a clump of balsams red with the glow of a fire. It was Muskwa's first fire. Also he saw his first horses, terrific-looking monsters even larger than Thor.

A third man—Metoosin, the Indian—came out to meet the

hunters, and into his hands Muskwa found himself transferred. He was laid on his side, and while one of his captors held him tightly by both ears, another fastened a hobble strap round his neck for a collar. A heavy halter rope was then tied to the ring on this strap, and the end of the rope was fastened to a balsam. Muskwa was free of the shirts, and as he staggered on four wobbly legs he bared his tiny fangs and snarled as fiercely as he could.

MUSKWA, CRUMPLED UP AGAINST the foot of the balsam, was not more than thirty feet from the fire. He could see the men eating, and he could hear them talking.

'We've got to trick him after what happened today,' declared Bruce. 'No more tracking 'im after this, Jimmy. He'll always know where we are.' He paused for a moment and listened. 'Funny the dogs don't come,' he said. 'It's dark now. They should be back. I wonder—' He looked at Langdon.

'Impossible!' exclaimed Langdon as he read the significance of his companion's look. 'Bruce, you don't mean to say that bear might kill them all.'

'I've hunted a good many grizzlies,' replied the mountaineer quietly, 'but I ain't never hunted a trickier one than this. Jimmy, he trapped them dogs on the ledge, an' he tricked the dog he killed up on the peak. He's liable to get 'em all into a corner, an' if that happens—'

Langdon said, 'If there were any alive at dark, they should be here pretty soon. I'm sorry now we didn't leave the dogs at home.'

Bruce laughed a little grimly. 'Fortunes o' war, Jimmy,' he said. 'You don't go hunting grizzlies with a pack of lapdogs, an' you've got to expect to lose some of them sooner or later. He's beat us in a square game, an' we dealt a raw hand at that in using dogs at all. Do you want that bear bad enough to go after him my way?'

Langdon nodded.

'You've got to drop pretty ideas when you run up against a killer,' began Bruce. 'There won't be any hour between now an' denning-up time that this grizzly doesn't get the wind from all directions. How? He'll make detours, backtracking two miles out of every six so he can get the wind of anything that's following him. An' he'll travel mostly nights, layin' high up in the rocks an' shale during the day.'

'What's your scheme for getting him?'

Bruce was silent for several moments before he replied.

'We've got his range mapped out,' he said. 'It's about twenty-five miles up an' down. He don't touch the mount'ins west of this valley

nor the mount'ins east of the other valley, an' he's dead certain to keep on makin' circles so long as we're after him. He's hikin' southward now on the other side of the range.

'We'll lay here for a few days an' not move. Then we'll start Metoosin through the valley over there with the dogs, if there's any left, and we'll start south through this valley at the same time. One of us will keep to the slopes an' the other to the bottom. Metoosin is pretty near bound to drive him around to us. We'll let him do the open hunting, an' we'll skulk. The bear can't get past us both without giving one of us a shot.'

'It sounds good,' agreed Langdon. 'And I've got a lame knee that I'm not unwilling to nurse for a few days.'

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when a sudden rattle of hobble chains and the startled snort of a grazing horse out in the meadow brought them both to their feet.

'The dogs,' said Bruce, and he whistled softly.

They heard a movement in the brush near them, and a moment later two of the dogs slunk into the firelight. As they prostrated themselves at the hunters' feet, a third and a fourth joined them.

They were not like the pack that had gone out that morning. They were hard run, and they knew that they were beaten. They had the appearance of whipped curs. A fifth came in out of the night. He was limping, and dragging a torn foreleg. Mutely Bruce and Langdon stared at them. They listened—waited. No other came.

Muskwa had climbed the tree to which he was fastened, and he lay all atremble in the saddle of a crotch five feet from the ground. When Metoosin led one of the dogs past him, the Airedale saw him and made a sudden spring that tore the leash from the Indian's hand. His leap carried him almost up to Muskwa. He was about to make another spring when Langdon rushed forward, caught the dog by his collar, and with the end of the leash gave him a sound beating. Then he led him away.

This act puzzled Muskwa. The man had saved him.

When Langdon returned, he stopped close to Muskwa's tree. Muskwa allowed Langdon's hand to approach within six inches and did not snap at it. Then a strange and sudden thrill shot through him. Langdon had boldly put his hand on his furry back.

Half a dozen times in the next ten minutes Langdon touched him. For the first three or four times Muskwa bared his two rows of shining teeth, but gradually he ceased.

Langdon left him then, and in a few moments he returned with a chunk of raw caribou meat. He held this close to Muskwa's nose.

Muskwa could smell it, but he backed away, and at last Langdon put it beside a basin of condensed milk he had already placed at the foot of the tree. 'Inside of two days he'll be eating out of my hand,' he said to Bruce.

It was not long before the camp became very quiet. Langdon, Bruce and Metoosin rolled themselves in their blankets and were soon asleep. The fire burned lower and lower. Soon there was only a single smouldering log. An owl hooted in the timber.

There was nothing to fear now. Very cautiously Muskwa began to back down the tree. He reached the foot of it, loosed his hold, and half fell into the basin of condensed milk, a part of it slopping up over his face. He shot out his tongue and licked his chops, and the sweet, sticky stuff filled him with a sudden and entirely unexpected pleasure. He circled the basin, every muscle prepared for a quick spring backwards if it should make a jump for him. At last his nose touched the delightful ambrosia, and he did not raise his head again until the last drop of it was gone.

The condensed milk was the one biggest factor in the civilising of Muskwa. He knew that the same hand that had touched him so gently had also placed this strange and wonderful feast at the foot of his tree, and that same hand had also offered him meat. He did not eat the meat, but he licked the basin until it shone.

Humped close to the tree, ready to climb up it at the first sign of danger, the cub waited for morning. Not a wink did he sleep. Even though he was less afraid than he had been, he was terribly lonesome. He missed Thor, and he whimpered so softly that the men a few yards away could not have heard him had they been awake. If the yearling Pipoonaskoos had come into the camp then, Muskwa would have welcomed him joyfully.

Morning came, and Metoosin was the first out of his blankets. He built a fire, and this roused Bruce and Langdon. Langdon, when he found Muskwa's basin licked clean, showed his pleasure by calling the others' attention to what had happened.

Muskwa had climbed to his crotch in the tree, and again he tolerated the stroking touch of Langdon's hand. Then Langdon brought forth another can, opened it, and emptied the contents into the basin. He held the basin up to Muskwa, so close that the milk touched the cub's nose, and for the life of him, Muskwa could not keep his tongue in his mouth. Within five minutes he was eating from the basin in Langdon's hand. But when Bruce came up to watch the proceedings, the cub bared all his teeth and snarled.

'Bears make better pets than dogs,' affirmed Bruce a little later

when they were eating breakfast. 'He'll be following you around like a puppy in a few days, Jimmy.'

'I'm getting fond of the little cuss already,' replied Langdon. 'I don't know just why, but there's something about bears that makes you love them. I'm not going to shoot many more—perhaps none after we get this dog-killer we're after. I almost believe he will be my last . . . Hello, what in thunder is the cub up to now?'

Muskwa had fallen the wrong way out of his crotch and was dangling like the victim at the end of a hangman's rope. Langdon ran to him, caught him boldly in his bare hands, lifted him up over the limb, and placed him on the ground. Muskwa did not snap at him or even growl.

Bruce and Metoosin were away from camp all of that day, spying over the range to the west, and Langdon was left to doctor the knee that he had battered against a rock the previous day. He spent most of his time in company with Muskwa. He opened a can of their griddle-cake syrup, and by noon he had the cub following him about the tree and straining to reach the dish that he held temptingly just out of reach.

At his present age Muskwa's affection and confidence were easily won. A baby black bear is very much like a human baby: he likes milk, he loves sweet things, and he wants to cuddle up close to any living thing that is good to him. He is the most lovable creature on four legs—round and soft and fluffy and so funny that he is sure to keep everyone about him in good humour.

As for Muskwa, he had gone syrup-mad. He could not remember that his mother had ever given him anything like it. Late in the afternoon Langdon untied Muskwa's rope and led him for a stroll down towards the creek. He carried the syrup dish, and every few yards he would pause and let the cub have a taste. After half an hour of this he dropped his end of the leash and walked campwards. And Muskwa followed! It was a triumph for Langdon.

It was late when Metoosin returned. An hour later Bruce came in, carrying something slung over his shoulders. He tossed it close to where Muskwa was hidden behind his tree. 'A skin like velvet, and some meat for the dogs,' he said. 'I shot it with my pistol.'

After a while Muskwa cautiously approached the carcass that lay three or four feet from him. He smelt it; then he whimpered as he nuzzled the soft fur, still warm with life. And for a time after that he was very still.

For the thing that Bruce had brought into camp and flung at the foot of his tree was the dead body of little Pipoonaskoos!



SCARCELY A MOVE did Muskwa make after his discovery. He did not know what death was, and as Pipoonaskoos was so warm and soft, he was sure that he would move after a little. He had no inclination to fight him now.

Again it grew very very still, and the stars filled the sky, and the fire burned low. But Pipoonaskoos did not move. Gently at first, Muskwa began nosing him, and as he did this he whimpered softly, as if saying, 'Wake up, Pipoonaskoos, and let's be friends.'

But still Pipoonaskoos did not stir, and at last Muskwa gave up all hope of waking him. And still whimpering, he snuggled close up to his fat little enemy and in time went to sleep.

Langdon was first up in the morning, and when he went over to see how Muskwa had fared during the night, he found that Muskwa and Pipoonaskoos were snuggled as closely as they could have snuggled had both been living. In some way Muskwa had arranged it so that one of the dead cub's little paws was embracing him.

Quietly Langdon called Bruce over to see. 'Dog meat,' breathed Langdon. 'You brought it home for dog meat, Bruce.'

Bruce did not answer; Langdon said nothing more. Later, instead of being skinned and fed to the dogs, Pipoonaskoos was put into a hole down in the creek bottom and covered with sand and stones. That much, at least, Bruce and Langdon did for him.

That day Langdon continued his education of Muskwa. Several times he took the cub near the dogs, and when they snarled and strained at the ends of their leashes, he whipped them, until with quick understanding they gripped the fact that Muskwa, although a bear, must not be harmed. In the afternoon of this second day he freed the cub entirely from the rope, and he had no difficulty in recapturing him when he wanted to tie him up again.

On the fourth night, which was thick with clouds, and chilly, Langdon experimented by taking Muskwa to bed with him. He expected trouble. But Muskwa was as quiet as a kitten, and once he found a proper nest for himself, he scarcely made a move until morning. A part of the night Langdon slept with one of his hands resting on the cub's soft, warm body.

According to Bruce it was now time to continue the hunt for Thor, but a change for the worse in Langdon's knee made it impossible for him to walk more than a quarter of a mile at a time, and the position he was compelled to take in the saddle caused him so much pain that to continue the hunt even on horseback was out of the question.

'A few more days won't hurt any,' consoled Bruce. 'If we give the old fellow a longer rest, he may get a bit careless.'

The days that followed were not without profit and pleasure for Langdon. The dogs were now confined to a clump of trees three hundred yards from the camp, and gradually the cub was given his freedom. He made no effort to run away, and he soon discovered that Bruce and Metoosin were also his friends. But Langdon was the only one he would follow.

On the morning of the eighth day after their pursuit of Thor, Bruce and Metoosin rode over into the eastward valley with the dogs. Metoosin was to have a day's start, and Bruce planned to return to camp that afternoon so that he and Langdon could begin their hunt up the valley the next day.

It was a glorious morning. A cool breeze came from the north and west, and at about nine o'clock Langdon fastened Muskwa to his tree, saddled a horse, and rode down the valley. He had no intention of hunting. It was a joy merely to ride and gaze upon the wonders of the mountains.

He travelled for three or four miles, until he came to a broad, low slope that broke through the range to the west. A desire seized upon him to look over into the other valley. As his knee was giving him no trouble, he cut a zigzag course upwards that in half an hour brought him almost to the top.

Here he came to a short, steep slide that compelled him to dismount and continue on foot. He had almost reached the top when his toe caught in a piece of slate, and in falling, he brought his rifle down with tremendous force on a boulder.

He was not hurt except for a slight twinge in his lame knee. But his gun was a wreck. The stock was shattered close to the breech.

He continued to climb over the rocks until he came to what appeared to be a broad, smooth ledge leading round the sandstone spur of the mountain. A hundred feet farther on, he found the ledge ended in a perpendicular wall of rock. From this point he had a splendid view of the broad sweep of country between the two ranges to the south. He sat down, pulled out his pipe, and prepared to enjoy the magnificent panorama.

Through his glass he could see for miles, and what he looked upon was an unhunted country. Scarcely half a mile away a band of caribou was filing slowly across the bottom towards the green slopes to the west. He caught the glint of many ptarmigan wings in the sunlight below. After a time, fully two miles away, he saw sheep grazing on a thinly verdured slide.

He wondered how many valleys there were like this in the vast reaches of the Canadian mountains that stretched three hundred

miles from sea to prairie and a thousand miles north and south. Hundreds, even thousands, he told himself, and each wonderful valley a world complete within itself.

It seemed to Langdon that these valleys would never grow old for him, that he could wander on for all time, passing from one into another, and that each would possess its own charm, its own secrets to be solved, its own life to be learned.

So engrossed was Langdon in his thoughts that he did not hear a sound behind him. And then something roused him.

He turned slowly, and the next moment his heart seemed to stop beating, his blood seemed to grow cold in his veins.

Barring the ledge not more than fifteen feet from him, his great jaws agape, his head moving slowly from side to side as he regarded his trapped enemy, stood Thor, the king of the mountains!

And in that space of a second or two Langdon's hands involuntarily gripped at his broken rifle, and he decided that he was doomed.

## Chapter Nine

A broken, choking breath—a stifled sound that was scarcely a cry—was all that came from Langdon's lips as he saw the monstrous grizzly looking at him.

His first thought was that he was powerless—utterly powerless. He could not even run, for the rock wall was behind him; there was a sheer fall of a hundred feet on the valley side. He was face to face with death, a death as terrible as that which had overtaken the dogs.

And yet in these last moments Langdon did not lose himself in terror. He saw the naked scar along the avenging grizzly's back where one of his bullets had ploughed; he saw the bare spot where another of his bullets had torn its way through Thor's foreshoulder. And he believed that Thor had deliberately followed him along the ledge and had cornered him here that he might repay in full measure what had been inflicted upon him.

Thor advanced—just one step—and then, in a slow, graceful movement, reared himself to full height. Langdon, even then, thought that he was magnificent. The man had made up his mind what to do when the great beast lunged forward. He would fling himself over the edge. Down below, there was one chance in a thousand for life. There might be a ledge or a projecting spur to catch him.

And Thor!

Suddenly—unexpectedly—he had come upon man. This was the

creature that had hunted him, hurt him—and it was so near that he could reach out with his paw and crush it! How weak and shrinking it looked now. Where was its strange thunder? Where was its burning lightning? Why did it make no sound?

Even a dog would have done more than this creature, for the dog would have shown its fangs, it would have snarled. A great, slow doubt swept through Thor's massive head. Was it really this shrinking, terrified thing that had hurt him? He smelt the man-smell. It was thick. And yet this time there came with it no hurt.

And again Thor came down to all fours. Steadily he looked at the man. Had Langdon moved then, he would have died. But Thor was not, like man, a murderer. For another half-minute he waited for a hurt, for some sign of menace. Neither came. Thor's nose swept the ground. Langdon saw the dust rise where the grizzly's hot breath stirred it. And after that, for long and terrible seconds, the bear and the man looked at each other.

Then very slowly—and doubtfully—Thor half turned. He growled. His lips drew partly back. Yet he saw no reason to fight, for that shrinking, white-faced pygmy crouching on the rock made no movement to offer him battle. He saw that he could not go on, for the ledge was blocked by the mountain wall. He disappeared in the direction from which he had come, his great head hung low, his long claws click-click-clicking like ivory castanets as he went.

Not until then did it seem to Langdon that he breathed again. He gave a great sobbing gasp. He rose to his feet, and his legs seemed weak. He waited—one minute, two, three—and then stole cautiously to the twist in the ledge round which Thor had gone. The rocks were clear, and Langdon began to retrace his steps, watching and listening and still clutching the broken rifle. When he came to the edge of the plain, he dropped down behind a huge boulder.

Three hundred yards away, Thor was ambling slowly over the crest of the dip towards the eastward valley. Not until the bear reappeared on the farther ridge of the hollow and then vanished again did Langdon follow.

The horse was where he had left it hobbled. Only after he was in the saddle did Langdon feel that he was completely safe. Then he laughed, a nervous, broken, joyous sort of laugh. 'You great big god of a bear,' he whispered. He was trembling. 'You—you monster with a heart bigger than man.' And then he added, as if not conscious that he was speaking, 'If I'd cornered you like that, I'd have killed you. And you! You cornered me and let me live!'

He rode towards camp, and as he went he knew that this day had





given the final touch to the big change that had been working in him. He had stood face to face with the king of the mountains, and the four-footed thing he had hunted and maimed had been merciful. He knew that hereafter and for all time he would not again hunt the life of Thor or the lives of any of his kind.

Langdon reached the camp and prepared himself some dinner, and as he ate this, with Muskwa for company, he made new plans for the days and weeks that were to follow. He and Bruce would no longer hunt the big grizzly. They would go on up to the edge of the Yukon, hitting back towards civilisation some time early in September. He would take Muskwa with them.

It was two o'clock and he was still dreaming of new and unknown trails into the north when a sound came to rouse him. At first it seemed to be only a part of the droning murmur of the valley. But slowly and steadily it rose above this, and at last Langdon recognised it. Yet even then he told himself that his ears must be playing him false. It could not be the barking of dogs. By this time Metoosin was far to the south with the pack. Quickly the sound grew more distinct, and at last he knew that he could not be mistaken. The dogs were coming up the valley. And there could be but one living thing in the length and breadth of the valley that Bruce would set the dogs after, and that was the big grizzly!

Langdon tied Muskwa to his tree, armed himself with another rifle, and resaddled his horse. Five minutes later he was riding swiftly in the direction of the range where, a short time before, Thor had given him his life.

THOR HEARD THE DOGS when they were a mile away. He was even less in a mood to run from them now than a few days before. Of the dogs alone he had no more fear than if they had been so many whistling marmots piping at him from the rocks. He had found them all mouth and little fang, and easy to kill. It was what followed close after them that disturbed him. But today he had stood face to face with the thing that had brought the strange scent into his valleys, and it had not offered to hurt him, and he had refused to kill it. Besides, he was again seeking Iskwao, the she-bear.

He was keeping to the high slopes where there were little dips and meadows broken by patches of shale and deep coulées. He was keeping the wind straight ahead so that he would not fail to catch the smell of Iskwao when he came near her, and with the baying of the dogs he caught no scent of the pursuing beasts or of the men who were riding behind them.

At another time he would have detoured so that the danger would be ahead of him, with the wind in his favour, but caution had now become secondary to his desire to find his mate. The dogs were less than half a mile away when Thor stopped, sniffed the air for a moment, and then went on swiftly until he was halted by a narrow ravine. Up that ravine Iskwao was coming from a dip lower down the mountain, and she was running. The yelping of the pack was fierce and close when Thor scrambled down in time to meet her as she rushed upwards. Iskwao paused for a single moment, smelt noses with him, and then went on, her ears laid back flat and her throat filled with growling menace.

Thor followed her, and he also growled. He knew that his mate was fleeing from the dogs, and again that deadly and slowly increasing wrath swept through him as he climbed after her higher up the mountain. In such an hour as this Thor was at his worst. He was a fighter when pursued as the dogs had pursued him—but he was a demon, terrible and without mercy, when danger threatened his mate. He fell farther and farther behind Iskwao, and twice he turned, his fangs gleaming under drawn lips.

When he came up out of the coulée, Iskwao had already disappeared. Where she had gone was a wild chaos of rockslide and piled-up debris. He looked up. Iskwao was among the rocks, not more than three hundred yards above. Here was the place to fight. The dogs were close, coming up the last stretch of the coulée, baying loudly. Thor turned and waited for them.

Half a mile to the south, looking through his glass, Langdon saw Thor, and at almost the same instant the dogs appeared over the edge of the coulée. He had ridden halfway up the mountain; from that point he had climbed higher and was following a well-beaten sheep trail at about the same altitude as Thor. From where he stood, the valley lay under his glass for miles. He did not have far to look to discover Bruce and Metoosin. They were dismounting at the foot of the coulée, and as he gazed they ran quickly into it and disappeared.

Again Langdon swung back to Thor. The dogs were holding him now, and he knew there was no chance of the grizzly's killing them in that open space. Then he saw movement among the rocks higher up, and he made out Iskwao climbing steadily towards the ragged peak. He knew that this second bear was a female. The big grizzly—her mate—had stopped to fight. And there was no hope for him if the dogs succeeded in holding him for ten minutes. Bruce and Metoosin would appear over the rim of the coulée at a range of less than a hundred yards.

Langdon started along the sheep trail. The shoulder of a ridge hid Thor and the dogs from him. When he came over that ridge and ran down the farther side, he stopped short. Further progress was barred by a steep ravine. He was five hundred yards from where Thor stood with his back to the rocks and his head to the pack.

As he looked, struggling to get breath enough to shout, Langdon expected to see Bruce and Metoosin appear out of the coulée. It flashed upon him then that even if he could make them hear, it would be impossible for them to understand him. Bruce would not guess that he wanted to spare the beast they had been hunting for almost two weeks.

Thor had rushed the dogs a full twenty yards towards the coulée when Langdon dropped behind a rock. There was only one way of saving him now. The pack had retreated a few yards down the slope, and he aimed at the pack. He must sacrifice his dogs or let Thor die. And that day Thor had given him his life! There was no hesitation as he pressed the trigger. It was a long shot, and the first bullet threw up a cloud of dust fifty feet short of the Airedales. He fired again and missed. The third time his rifle cracked, there answered it a sharp yelp of pain. One of the dogs rolled over and over down the slope.

The reports of the shots alone had not stirred Thor, but now when he saw one of his enemies crumple up and go rolling down the mountain, he turned slowly towards the safety of the rocks. A fourth and then a fifth shot followed, and at the fifth, the yelping dogs dropped back towards the coulée.

Langdon sprang up, and his eyes caught the skyline. Iskwao had just reached the top. She paused for a moment and looked down. Then she disappeared.

Thor was now hidden among the boulders and broken masses of sandstone, following her trail. Within two minutes after the grizzly disappeared, Bruce and Metoosin scrambled up over the edge of the coulée. From where they stood, even the skyline was within fairly good shooting distance, and Langdon suddenly began shouting excitedly, waving his arms, and pointing downwards.

Bruce and Metoosin were caught by his ruse. They believed that Langdon could see the progress of the bear and that it was running towards the valley. Not until they were another hundred yards down the slope did they look back at Langdon to get further directions. From his rock, Langdon was pointing to the skyline. Thor was just going over. He paused for a moment, as Iskwao had stopped, and took one last look at man. And Langdon, as he saw the last of him, waved his hat and shouted, 'Good luck to you, old man. Good luck!'

## Chapter Ten

That night Langdon and Bruce made their new plans, while Metoosin sat aloof, smoking his pipe in stolid silence. Thereafter through many moons Metoosin would never forget to relate to his children and his grandchildren how he had once hunted with a white man who had shot his own dogs to save the life of a grizzly bear. Metoosin knew that he would never hunt with him again. For Langdon was *keskwao* now. Something had gone wrong in his head. The Great Spirit had taken away his heart and had given it to a grizzly bear, and over his pipe Metoosin watched him cautiously. This suspicion was confirmed when he saw Langdon making a cage out of a cowhide pannier and realised that the cub was to accompany them on their journey.

The next morning at sunrise the outfit was ready for its long trail into the northland. Bruce and Langdon led the way into the valley where they had first encountered Thor, with Metoosin bringing up the rear. Langdon was satisfied and happy. 'It was the best hunt of my life,' he said to Bruce. 'I'll never be sorry we let him live.'

Muskwa was rolling and pitching about in his pannier like a raw amateur in a howdah on an elephant's back. Half a dozen times during the next two or three hours Langdon dropped behind to see how the cub was riding. Each time that he returned to Bruce, he was quieter, as if debating something with himself.

It was nine o'clock when they came to what was undoubtedly the end of Thor's valley. To the east rose a green and undulating slope, up which the horses could easily travel and which would take the outfit into a new valley in the direction of the Driftwood. This course Bruce decided to pursue.

Halfway up the slope, they stopped to give the horses a breathing spell. In his cowhide prison Muskwa whimpered pleadingly. Langdon heard, but he seemed to pay no attention. He was looking steadily back into the valley. It was glorious in the morning sun. He could see the peaks under which lay the cool, dark lake in which Thor had fished. It struck him that he was leaving things as they had been before he came. And yet, *was* he leaving things as they had been?

Again, close to him, Muskwa whimpered softly.

Then Langdon turned to Bruce. 'It's settled,' he said, and his words had a decisive ring to them. 'My mind's made up. You and Metoosin go on when the horses get their wind. I'm going to ride down there a mile or so and free the cub where he'll find his way back home.'

He took Muskwa in his arms and rode back into the south.

A mile up the valley, Langdon came to a wide, open meadow, sweet with the perfume of flowers. Here he dismounted and for ten minutes sat on the ground with Muskwa. From his pocket he drew forth a small paper bag and fed the cub its last sugar. There was a mist in his eyes as Muskwa's soft little nose nuzzled the palm of his hand. At last he jumped up and sprang into his saddle.

'Goodbye, old fellow,' he said, and his voice was choking. 'Goodbye, little Spitfire. Mebbe someday I'll come back and see you, and you'll be a big, fierce bear—but I won't shoot. Never . . .'

He rode fast into the north. Three hundred yards away, he turned his head and looked back. Muskwa was following but losing ground. Langdon waved his hand. 'Goodbye,' he called. 'Goodbye.'

Half an hour later he looked down from the top of the slope through his glass. He saw Muskwa, a black dot. The cub had stopped and was waiting confidently for him to return.

And trying to laugh but failing dismally, Langdon rode over the divide and out of Muskwa's life.

FOR A GOOD HALF-MILE Muskwa followed over the trail of Langdon. He ran at first; then he walked; finally he stopped and sat down. He was sure that the friend he had grown to love would return. He always came back. He had never failed him. So he began to hunt about for the bulbous roots he liked, and for some time he was careful not to stray very far away from where the outfit had passed.

When the sun began to go down and the heavy shadows of the mountain darkened the valley, the cub began to grow afraid. He was still a very small baby, and only that one dreadful night after his mother had died had he spent entirely alone. Until now he had never felt the loneliness and emptiness of darkness. He crawled under a clump of thorn close to the trail and continued to wait and listen. Not until dawn did he steal out cautiously from his shelter of thorn.

The sun gave him courage and confidence again, and he began wandering back through the valley. By evening he was tired and hungry, and he was utterly lost.

That night he slept in the end of a hollow log. The next day he went on, and for many days and many nights after that he was alone in the big valley. He was almost forgetting Langdon now, and he was thinking more and more about Thor and about his mother. He wanted them. He wanted them more than he had ever wanted the companionship of man, for Muskwa was fast becoming a creature of the wild again.

It was the beginning of August before the cub came to the break in



the valley and climbed up over the slope where Thor had first heard the thunder and had first felt the sting of the white men's guns. In these two weeks Muskwa had grown rapidly, and he was no longer afraid of the dark.

It was fully a week before he passed along the creek bottom close under the slope where his mother had died. If he had been travelling along the crest of the slope, he would have found her bones, picked clean by the wild things. It was another week before he came to the meadow where Thor had killed the caribou and the big black bear.

And now Muskwa knew that he was home!

For two days he did not travel two hundred yards from the scene of feast and battle, and night and day he was on the watch for Thor.

One day he went farther than usual in his quest for roots. He was a good half-mile from the place he had made home, and he was sniffing about the end of a rock when a great shadow fell suddenly upon him. He looked up, and for a full half-minute he stood transfixed. Within five feet of him stood Thor! The big grizzly was as motionless as he, looking at him steadily. And then Muskwa gave a puppylike whine of joy and ran forward. Thor lowered his huge head, and for another half-minute they stood without moving, with Thor's nose buried in the hair on Muskwa's back. After that Thor went up the slope as if the cub had never been lost at all, and Muskwa followed him happily.

There followed many days of wonderful travel and of glorious feasting. Muskwa grew fatter and fatter and heavier and heavier, until by the middle of September he was as large as a good-sized dog.

But at last October came. The nights were very cold, and for whole days at a time the sun would not shine, and the skies were dark and heavy with clouds. On the peaks, the snow was growing deeper and deeper, and it never thawed now up near the skyline. Snow fell in the valley too—at first just enough to make a white carpet that chilled Muskwa's feet, but it quickly disappeared. Raw winds began to come out of the north, and at night the trees made mournful sounds. To Muskwa the whole world seemed changing.

In November the snow and the cold winds and the fierce blizzards from the north came in earnest, and the ponds and lakes began to freeze over. Muskwa shivered with the cold at night and wondered if the sun was ever going to shine again.

One day about the middle of November, Thor stopped in the very act of digging out a family of whistling marmots, went straight down into the valley and struck southwards in a most businesslike way. They were ten miles from the clay-wallow canyon when they started, but so lively was the pace set by the big grizzly

that they reached it before dark that same afternoon.

For two days after this Thor wandered about among the rocks, smelling and listening and deporting himself in a fashion mystifying to Muskwa. In the afternoon of the second day Thor stopped in a clump of jack pines under which the ground was strewn with fallen needles. He began to eat these needles. They did not look good to Muskwa, but something told the cub that he should do as Thor was doing, so he licked them up, not knowing that it was nature's last preparation for his long sleep.

It was four o'clock when they came to the mouth of the deep cavern in which Thor had been born, and here again Thor paused, sniffing up and down the wind. It was growing dark. A wailing storm hung over the canyon. Biting winds swept down from the peaks, and the sky was black and full of snow.

For a minute the grizzly stood with his head and shoulders in the cavern door. Then he entered. Muskwa followed. Deep back they went through a pitch-black gloom, and it grew warmer and warmer, and the wailing of the wind died away.

It took Thor at least half an hour to arrange himself just as he wanted to sleep. Then Muskwa curled up beside him.

That night the storm raged, and the snow fell deep. It came up the canyon in clouds, and it drifted down through the canyon roof in still thicker clouds, and all the world was buried deep. When morning came, there was no cavern door. All was white and still.

Deep back in the cavern, Muskwa moved restlessly. Thor heaved a deep sigh. After that, long and soundly they slept. And it may be that they dreamed.

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## JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

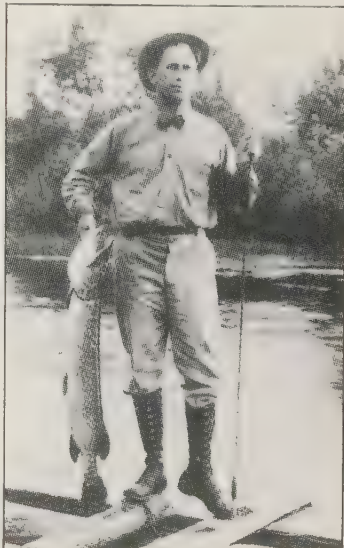
'Little Muskwa was with me all that summer and autumn in the Canadian Rockies . . . And Thor still lives, for his range is in a country where no hunters go.' The words might well have been spoken by Jim Langdon, the young outdoorsman of *The Bear*. In fact, they are those of the author himself, referring to a season he spent in northern Canada in 1914. More than seventy years later, the book James Oliver Curwood wrote of that experience—*The Bear*—was made into a film that captured hearts all around the world.

Born in Michigan in 1878, James Oliver Curwood became a reporter for a Detroit newspaper, but his love of nature and of the wilderness soon turned him to writing adventure novels. What changed him from an enthusiastic hunter to a champion of protecting animals was his experience of coming face to face with a grizzly who chose not to kill him. That real-life encounter became the dramatic cornerstone of *The Bear*, which the author wrote 'to make others feel and understand that the greatest thrill of the hunt is not in killing but in letting live'.

James Oliver Curwood, who died in 1927, was the author of thirty-three books. Though he claimed Owosso, Michigan, as his home, his heart was in the unspoiled vastness of the Canadian Rockies. In his preface to *The Bear*, he wrote, 'This year I am going back into the country of Thor and Muskwa . . . And I believe that Muskwa would know me if we chance to meet again. I like to think he has not forgotten the sugar, and the scores of times he cuddled up close to me at night . . . But, after all, perhaps he would not forgive me for that last day when we ran away from him so hard—leaving him alone to his freedom in the mountains.'

It was a freedom James Oliver Curwood well understood.

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